The Origins of Russian Literary Theory
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Folklore, Philology, Form

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THE TERM “THEORY” as used in literary studies encompasses a broad spectrum of overlapping intellectual traditions. Some of these are overtly defined by a shared philosophical commitment—for example, Freudian, Marxist, or postcolonial theory. Others can be defined by a shared theory of language or set of interpretive procedures—for example, New Criticism, Russian Formalism, or deconstruction. However, despite the breadth of the field, (French) structuralism and post-structuralism clearly hold a central place in the history of modern literary theory. These movements, dominant in the 1960s and 1970s, constituted a peak moment for literary theory; they were internationally influential not only in literary studies, but across the humanities and social sciences more broadly. As a result, earlier movements—particularly Russian Formalism and Czech structuralism (active from the 1910s to the 1940s)—are often understood as precursors to post–World War II structuralism. The broader contours of this book affirm the basic truth of this accepted genealogy.

However, my rationale for writing a new intellectual history of modern literary theory has been spurred by evidence that this history is not strictly linear. The end point for my narrative is a resurgence of interest in the study of literary form, which has been growing since the turn of the twenty-first century. This momentum is manifested in movements such as new formalism, historical poetics, quantitative formalism, and cognitive poetics. These diverse approaches often call for a “return to form,” along with efforts to reconsider the conceptual framework for its study. This scholarship can be situated within the broader phenomenon that Julie Orlemanski has described as the “turn against the linguistic turn.” She cites historian Michael Roth’s evocative 2007 description of this latest turn as a sea change felt across the humanities:

For the last decade or so, recognition has been spreading that the linguistic turn that had motivated much advanced work in the humanities is over. The massive tide of language that connected analytic philosophy with pragmatism,
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anthropology with social history, philosophy of science with deconstruction, has receded; we are now able to look across the sand to see what might be worth salvaging before the next waves of theory and research begin to pound the shore.²

The “linguistic turn,” for this book, refers to the extension of Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic theory as a kind of “Ur-logic” that supported analogies between “the organization of language, texts, cognition, and society.”³ The waning of the structuralist and post-structuralist paradigm is a central factor in the rise of novel approaches to the concept of form within literary studies. What is being sought, apparently, is a concept of form, and a rationale for studying literary form, that does not presuppose a structuralist philosophy of language. (For a brief explication of the latter, see the appendix.)

This book seeks to contribute to this process by explicating the assumptions underlying the pre- or non-structuralist branches of Russian Formalist literary theory. I will refer to these branches as “lost” directions in literary theory, because they are largely unstudied. In order to make them visible and coherent we need to reconstruct a forgotten philosophy of language, one that traced the origins and evolution of patterns in language usage to their extralinguistic sources. These sources varied: in the mid-nineteenth century, philologists drew on universal logics to explain regularities, and referred to philosophies of history (e.g., a Hegelian philosophy of history as a directional process) to explain language change. As I will show, the Russian Formalists initially assumed that psychological laws were the ultimate source of verbal form, and that social factors (e.g., population contact, movement) caused its persistence or change over time. This mode of thinking about language, which I will refer to as the “philological paradigm,” differed from the structuralist philosophy of language. The latter insisted that the source of formal linguistic patterns, and the explanation for their evolution over time, is in the structure of language itself. This central difference, between language-extrinsic and language-intrinsic explanatory logic, has extensive ramifications for the concept of verbal form, and for the relationship between form and cultural history.

My approach to reconstructing this lost philosophy of language is intellectual-historical. I seek to explain the history of ideas by situating them in relation to academic, scholarly, and cultural institutions. My analysis, and often the novelty of my arguments, relies on archival research in the institutional archives of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the Prague Linguistic Circle, as well as the personal archives of Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, and others. The most important of these sources, for this book, is the archive of the Moscow Linguistic Circle (MLC).⁴ Its contents, including minutes of
bimonthly meetings held between 1918 and 1923, allow for a more historically contextualized understanding of the early years of the movement.\(^5\)

I use these sources to reconstruct lost paths within the intellectual genealogy that begins with the Russian Formalists and culminates with poststructuralism. These are the branches of Formalism, developed in the late 1910s and early 1920s, which structuralist and post-structuralist accounts often discount as “inadequacies” which were fortunately “eliminated in the second phase of formalism.”\(^6\) I have sought to take these abandoned paths seriously, to explain their presuppositions and goals, and to present them as potentially useful for developing Formalist approaches to literary studies today. I do this by locating a starting point for the history of literary theory earlier in time. While most histories of the field begin with the 1910s, I begin in the mid-nineteenth century. In chapter 1, I argue that in order to reconstruct the philosophy of language which informed Russian Formalist theory, we have to look to Romantic language philosophies and comparative philology. This allows us to see how Russian philologists drew on these traditions in an original move to develop a “theory of verbal art” (teoriia slovesnosti) that inspired the Russian Formalists to improve on their work.

After 1900, this book treats institutions and individuals more typically covered in the existing scholarship on Russian Formalism: Alexander Veselovsky and Alexander (Oleksandr) Potebnia; the Formalist societies OPOIAZ (the Society for the Study of Poetic Language) and the MLC; the Prague Linguistic Circle; and the collaboration between Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss in the 1940s and 1950s. This, in its broad contours, is a familiar trajectory. However, because my aim is not to trace a single genealogy, but to call attention to forgotten ideas which have remained largely unstudied, the central parts of this book—chapters 2, 3, and 4—all describe the same period: the mid-1910s and early 1920s. Chapter 2 calls attention to the social and political motivations for the OPOIAZ study of poetics in the revolutionary period, and recovers an unacknowledged, antibourgeois, Formalist theory of authorship. These motivations become more visible when the Formalist movement is presented as the successor to the philological paradigm. Chapter 3 illustrates the psychological underpinnings of Shklovsky’s narrative theory, and chapter 4 examines the pre-structuralist, sociolinguistic poetics of Jakobson and the MLC. By shifting our focus to seemingly marginal, theoretical detours, I recontextualize some of the Formalists’ more famous ideas—for example, the declaration of the autonomy of art, the meaning of defamiliarization (ostranenie), and the concept of poetic language—which have come to seem self-evident. Chapter 5 describes the emergence of structuralism: rather than present post–World War II structuralism as a culmination of earlier movements formed in Rus-
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In Russia and in Czechoslovakia, I stress the differences between the structuralist literary theory which emerged in the 1950s (which was rooted in information theory) and the earlier work based on the historical study of natural languages. The book’s conclusion jumps from the 1960s to the twenty-first century, drawing connections between the lost paths of the 1910s and 1920s and the formalisms that are in development today.

The arguments in this book are made possible by a wealth of existing scholarship on Russian Formalism and Czech structuralism. To recuperate lost branches of theory presupposes an existing, established narrative which overlooks these branches. The foundational scholarship on these movements was published primarily in the 1970s. Some of the most important monographs include those by Victor Erlich (1965), Fredric Jameson (1972), Aage Hansen-Löve (1978), Peter Steiner (1984), and Jurij Striedter (1989). These books generally take an ahistorical approach to their subject matter; the movements are explained in terms of their internal logic, which connects different thinkers. Steiner’s Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics, for example, organizes Formalist theory into four conceptual tropes. More recent scholarship, including this book, takes a contextualizing, historical approach—seeking to explain Formalism and structuralism as products of a historical moment and milieu. Exemplary of this second wave of scholarship are works by Ilona Svetlikova (2005), Galin Tihanov (2004, 2019), and Jan Levchenko (2012). While this second wave of contextualizing work often complements the internal accounts, the two approaches can also produce divergent interpretations of Formalist theory. This book argues that contextualizing Russian Formalism in the linguistic philosophy of the Formalists’ contemporaries and teachers, that is, as informed by the philological paradigm, allows for a new understanding of some of their central ideas.

This divergence emerges in part from the fact that the first wave of scholarship on Russian Formalism often explained Formalism through the lens of structuralism. Even while scholars admit the difficulty of subsuming the diverse Formalist thinkers and schools under a single paradigm, there is a general tendency in the scholarship from the 1960s to the 1980s to privilege Formalist ideas that appear compatible with structuralism. Erlich articulates this with an explicit value judgment: “Russian formalism at its best was or tended to be Structuralism.” Generally speaking, scholars adopt two (often overlapping) strategies to confine Formalism within a structuralist lens: they explain it using a teleological narrative, as evolving in the direction of structuralism; or they treat it (“at its best”) as equivalent to structuralism, a narrative of conflation. Striedter’s book exemplifies the first approach. Striedter accounts for differences between Russian Formalism and structuralism as “stages” of development. In his words, his book describes “a single
and coherent method which evolved in clearly distinguished stages”; these are labeled “early Formalism,” “late Formalism/early Prague Structuralism,” and “Prague Structuralism.” What allows Striedter to treat this history as one of stadial evolution is his view that “during its entire existence Russian Formalism was closely allied with the budding discipline of structural linguistics.” While I do not want to dispute that Formalist theory was always in a state of “evolution,” something that the Formalists themselves stressed, I am calling attention to the tendency, in the reception of Formalism after the 1960s, to see the movement as a progression toward the achievement of structuralism.

In contrast to the discourse of phases or stages, Jameson conflates Formalism and structuralism as two “projections” of the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure. He playfully suggests that “French Structuralism is related to Russian Formalism . . . as crossed cousins within an endogamous kinship system. Both ultimately derive from Saussure’s foundational distinction between langue and parole . . . but they exploit it in different ways.” The English-language reception of Formalism shows a stronger tendency toward conflation, likely encouraged by the delayed introduction of the movement, contemporaneously with structuralism in 1960s. (I will return to this point at the end of this introduction.) By situating Russian Formalism in an intellectual history that is not structuralist, this book seeks to counter overly reductive interpretations of the movement which derive from the teleological and the conflating narratives established in the 1970s.

Significantly, even within the first wave of scholarship on Formalism, there was no consensus as to the movement’s relationship to structuralism. Steiner contrasts Russian Formalism and Czech structuralism on the basis of their epistemologies: Formalism idealized “facts” and strove for “pure knowledge: knowledge devoid of any external presuppositions,” while the structuralists grounded their theory in an “epistemological stance” deriving from an “awareness of a system.” Building on this claim, Steiner describes Russian Formalism as a “pre-paradigm” or “inter-paradigm” state of science, a movement defined by “conceptual disunity.” This opposition between Russian Formalism and Czech structuralism informs his 1984 monograph, which concludes that Russian Formalism was “not the sum total of its theories . . . but a polemos, a struggle among contradictory and incompatible views.” Unlike the teleological and conflating narratives, Steiner stresses the fundamental differences between structuralism and Formalism. Of the accounts summarized here, I find Steiner’s description of Russian Formalism as a “polemos” most compelling. I agree with his conclusions that efforts to “pin down the identity” of the movement as a whole are futile, and that the movement’s methodological and epistemological “pluralism” truly raises the
question of whether a single label—Russian Formalism—is “worthwhile to retain . . . at all.” However, my analysis diverges from Steiner’s conclusions. This book will show that there was a non-structuralist, and yet coherent, conceptual paradigm that informed the emergence of Russian Formalism. I will be referring to this as the “philological paradigm.” My work builds on the scholarship of colleagues in Russia, such as Svetlikova, Levchenko, and Ilya Kalinin, as well as others in the United States and Europe who view Russian Formalism as a response to turn-of-the-century artistic, philosophical, and political thought. My approach is particularly close to that of Ilona Svetlikova’s 2005 monograph, in which she demonstrates the importance of European psychologism to the emergence of Russian Formalism. I share her ambition “to understand the Formal School as a part of a particular intellectual whole; to connect the scholarly work of its members with a particular tradition and a particular scholarly context.” My work is also crucially informed by that of Galin Tihanov, who has helped to establish the broader historical context for Formalism. His seminal 2004 essay “Why Did Modern Literary Theory Originate in Central and Eastern Europe?” identifies a cluster of philosophical, ideological, and cultural factors as the necessary conditions for the emergence of modern literary theory. My book, like Svetlikova’s and Tihanov’s work, seeks to identify the critical aspects of the intellectual context which enabled the emergence of Russian Formalism. However, the context that I describe is broader than Svetlikova’s and narrower than Tihanov’s.

My thinking has also been impacted by the recent work of Boris Maslov and Ilya Kliger on the legacy of Alexander Veselovsky. In separate articles, and in a collected volume, Persistent Forms: Explorations in Historical Poetics (2015), they have called attention to Veselovsky’s work in the field he described as “historical poetics” (istoricheskaia poetika). Their scholarship not only seeks to demonstrate Veselovsky’s largely unacknowledged importance to the emergence of modern literary theory, but also to present his work as a resource for twenty-first-century literary studies. I share their commitment to rethinking the history of theory as a means of spurring creative and productive new scholarship. In this book, I attempt to strike a balance between historicizing Russian Formalist theory with regard to the intellectual context of the early twentieth century, and highlighting aspects of this theory that are consonant with movements in the twenty-first century. As I discuss in the conclusion, one point of commonality is in grounding the concept of “form” in relation to cognitive principles and mechanisms that are not specific to language. Another shared feature is in the perceived relevance of literary forms to sociopolitical concerns. Ultimately, however, my goal is to clarify the Formalists’ conceptual presuppositions so that others may judge the utility of these ideas for themselves.
It is to be stressed that in using the adjective “philological” I am not suggesting that every aspect of philological study is evoked by the term “philological paradigm.” In this section I will outline which aspects of philological study were relevant for the “philological paradigm.” Philology, as a term used without a descriptive adjective, is often defined as the study of texts. As Saussure put it, “philology seeks primarily to establish, interpret, and comment upon texts.” Or as Sheldon Pollock more recently has argued, “philology is, or should be, the discipline of making sense of texts. It is . . . the theory of textuality as well as the history of textualized meaning.” These definitions refer to a scholarly tradition, also called textual studies, which is often traced to Friedrich August Wolf, Friedrich Wilhelm Ritschl, and Karl Lachmann. This is not the philological tradition that I am discussing here. Instead, my argument is about comparative philology, a distinct branch of study, traced to the work of German and Danish scholars such as Franz Bopp, Rasmus Rask, and Jacob Grimm, who established a method and techniques for the comparative study of Indo-European grammatical structures and lexica in the 1810s and 1820s.

In introducing the philological paradigm, I will first describe the method that these scholars adhered to. I will then turn to the philosophy of language that informed the paradigm and shaped scholars’ thinking about the nature and limits of their object of study. In Russian, the method that defines the philological paradigm is often referred to as the “comparative-historical method” (sravnitel’no-istoricheskii metod). It was inspired by the tradition of comparative Indo-European grammar study established by Franz Bopp and others, which was then extended to the study of mythology by Jacob Grimm. In Russia, Fyodor Buslaev (1818–1897), a highly influential professor of Russian literature at Moscow University, insisted on adherence to the comparative method for academic philological studies. Buslaev was, like Grimm, a scholar of grammar and mythology as well as oral traditions (folklore). His students, Alexander Veselovsky (1838–1906) and Alexander Potebnya (1835–1891), proposed extending this method to the study of written literature.

Locating the beginnings of modern literary theory in the mid-nineteenth century allows for a reinterpretation of the view that literary theory emerged as part of a “linguistic turn” which occurred with Saussurean, structuralist linguistics in the 1920s. The turn to linguistics (philology) as a model for a theory of literature was actually urged decades earlier. In an 1870 introductory lecture to a course on the “History of World Literature” (“Vseobsheoi istorii literature”), Veselovsky enthusiastically promoted the comparative historical method for literary study:
It is well known what a revolution the application of the comparative method has wrought in the study, and in the value of the results obtained, in the field of linguistics. The method has also recently been introduced in the areas of mythology, folk poetry, the so-called migratory legends... the successes of linguistics on this path give hope that in the areas of both historical and literary phenomena we may also expect, if not identical, at least approximately exact results.22

The rhetoric here is remarkably similar to later pronouncements by theorists such as Jakobson, Roland Barthes, or Claude Lévi-Strauss, claiming that adopting the latest, cutting-edge linguistic theories would allow for analogous progress in the field of literary studies (see chapter 5).

The comparative historical method is based on the process of inductive inference. As Dan Hunter explains: “Induction is, generally, the process of taking a number of specific instances, classifying them into categories according to relevant attributes and outcomes, and deriving a broadly applicable rule from them. That is, we take a number of isolated experiences and attempt to explain them by a general rule that covers all the instances examined.”23 In Veselovsky’s words, the scholar begins with a “series of facts” taken from “historical and social life” and begins to look for repeating relationships within a “series,” and to compare these to relationships observed in “parallel series of similar facts” for verification. Successive verification allows the scholar to posit principles, and then to confirm cause and effect, and finally to move from generalizations to “laws.”24

Though Veselovsky does not give a particular example of the comparative historical method, we can supply one from the study of sound change. The method was applied in this field by observing patterns in the formal differences between cognate words. Rasmus Rask wrote that “if there is found between two languages agreement in the forms of indispensable words to such an extent that rules of letter changes can be discovered for passing from one to the other, then there is a basic relationship between the two languages.”25 In Grimm’s most famous work, in which he compared the words for “daughters”—thugatere (Greek), daughters (Gothic), töchter (Old High German)—he observed that the Greek consonant sound “Th” regularly became “D” and “T” in successive changes in the history of Germanic languages.26 Successive comparisons (e.g., of the words for “two”) reveal a principled, regular pattern, which has become known as “Grimm’s law.”

Thus, the goal of comparative philological studies was to elucidate a rule or law that governs a category of linguistic phenomena. In the nineteenth century, this work was subsumed within a larger preoccupation with questions of historical sequence. The rules derived from comparison were,
As Robins and others have pointed out, “the very term ‘Grimm’s law’ is an anachronism; he did not make technical use of the word law to describe what he referred to as sound shift [Lautverschiebung]; and in a much quoted passage he remarked: ‘The sound shift is a general tendency; it is not followed in every case.’”\(^27\) The anachronism here derives from projecting later expectations onto nineteenth-century comparative philology. Scholars of nineteenth-century linguistics have suggested that developments beginning around 1870 represented an important shift in terms of the rationale for comparative studies. The earlier (pre-1870) rationale is described as reconstructing earlier language states for their own sake, a process which referred to logic (rather than the formal properties of words, such as phonology) as a means of explanation. The later rationale understands comparative reconstruction as “a means for lengthening the history of a language and consequently providing better evidence to account for existing forms.”\(^28\) While it is difficult to generalize about all of nineteenth-century linguistics, scholars have suggested that it was not until later in the century that comparative philologists began to prioritize formal explanations for language change. Analyzing comparative linguistics before the 1870s, Paul Kiparsky has argued that although comparativists such as Bopp were capable of highly sophisticated thinking about phonology, their reconstructions proceeded on the basis of semantic analysis, preferring this kind of argumentation over phonological

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\(^{1}\) Thus, to take an example from the Dentals:

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<td>Greek.</td>
<td>ta</td>
<td>thugatere</td>
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<td>L. Germ.</td>
<td>the</td>
<td>daughters</td>
<td>two</td>
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<td>H. Germ.</td>
<td>die</td>
<td>tüchter</td>
<td>zwei</td>
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It will be seen that the High Germ. is always a stage in advance of Low Germ., and this a stage in advance of Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, &c. The Germ. z is sounded *ts*; and *s*, like *h*, is a breathing.—Trans.

data, even when it was known. Sound shifts, such as the “general tendency” described by Grimm, did not have to be exceptionless “laws” because the history of language was not understood to be exclusively determined by the intrinsic constraints of its formal structure.

Even philologists who argued that language history is determined by “inalterable laws” did not always locate the source of these laws in the formal structure of language. For instance, August Schleicher famously argued that language is properly understood as an “organism.” Although Schleicher’s studies focused on phonology and morphology, he used a generalized organic model to explain language history, and argued that languages follow a universal pattern according to which “a prehistoric period of language development is followed by a historical period of language decay.” In sum, the methodology being developed in the historical comparative study of language made precise observations regarding language form, but did not necessarily look to these formal descriptions as causal factors when explaining language change over time.

For Veselovsky as well, the historical development of a poetic tradition is not determined by earlier states of that same tradition (understood as a reservoir of formal devices). He explained literary evolution with Hegelian “universal history.” Maslov and Kliger describe Veselovsky’s “historico-philosophical” framework as “a post-Hegelian or Spencerian assertion of the general movement towards human emancipation and individuation.” His assumption is that “societies” universally “pass through a number of stages in the process of development from primitive communality to individualistic modernity.” This “post-Hegelian idealist vision . . . that literary forms evolve in a way that is more or less uniform across cultures” was what “made possible systematic comparative inquiry into literature.” While Veselovsky’s primary focus was the comparative study of poetic form, for him the study of verbal art is ultimately the study of the stadial history of social thought. In an 1894 publication, he explained this by beginning with the question: “What is the history of literature?” He answers: “Literary history is the history of social thought in its imagistic-poetic survival [perezhivanie] and in the forms that express this sedimentation. History of thought is a broader notion; literature is its partial manifestation.” The patterns derived from the inductive, comparative study of literary form were thought to result from the laws of history—not from the nature of literary forms themselves.

Inductive comparison was the mandatory method for scholarly work in the philological paradigm. However, it did not provide a complete framework for thinking about language as an object of study. A particularly interesting moment in the history of the philological paradigm occurred when Russian scholars sought to combine the comparative method with a Romantic philosophy of language. This line of thinking understands language, often
in psychological terms, as inextricable from thought, and can be traced to
the influence of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century thinkers such as
Johann Gottfried von Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt. Robins articu-
lates Herder’s impact as follows: “The close connection between thought
and language had been a commonplace of philosophy since antiquity,” but
while earlier writers had assumed a hierarchic dependence of language on
prior thought, Herder’s articulation of “the common origin and parallel de-
velopment of both together through successive stages of growth and ma-
turity was rather new.”33 This linkage between language and thought was
extended to an identification between language and cultural identity, and,
in the context of nineteenth-century nationalist “awakenings,” an identifica-
tion between language and national identity. The Slovak linguist and revo-

cutionary L’udovít Štúr, who is credited with codifying literary Slovak in the
1840s, exemplifies the link between a Herderian philosophy of language and
a concept of national sovereignty:

Every nation is most ardently coupled with its language. The nation is re-
flected in it as the first product of its theoretical spirit; language is, then, the
surest sign of the essence and individuality of every nation. Just like an indi-

cidual human being, the nation reveals its deepest inner self through lan-
guage; it, so to speak, embodies its spirit in language.34

Similar statements can be found in the writings of patriotic philologists in
Russia, as well as in Germany and among the foreign-ruled peoples of cen-

tral Europe, such as the Slovaks. A widely embraced and fundamental tru-

ism of this philosophy was that language is inseparable from the historical
and social reality of its speakers.

Humboldt and his student Heymann (Chajim) Steinthal developed
this understanding of language in more precise detail. Like Herder, Hum-

boldt believed that “language is the formative organ of thought” (Sprache
is das bildende Organ des Gedanken) and shapes a speaker’s “worldview”
(Weltansicht). Ana Deumert explains Humboldt’s philosophy as asserting
that “human cognition and perception are historically and culturally embed-
ded in the inner structures of specific languages, leading to a multiplicity of
ways of seeing, conceptualizing, and assimilating the world around us.”35 As
Humboldt wrote in 1812, “all languages taken together resemble a prism
where each side shows the universe in differently tinted color.”36 Humboldt’s
articulation of the nature of the relationship between language, thought, and
the speaker’s social world would fundamentally shape Russian philologists’
understanding of the nature of language.

The Russian tradition stressed two Humboldtian ideas in particular.
The first was that language is to be understood as a creative act, which always
entails a negotiation between the individual and the collective, between the speaker's creative impulse and the rules and norms within which any speaker/perceiver operates. As Humboldt wrote:

Language, considered in its true nature, is something which is constantly and in every moment in transition . . . Language is not a product [Ergon] but an activity [Energeia]. . . . Language belongs to me because I produce it in my very own way; and since the basis of this lies in the speaking and having-spoken of all previous generations . . . it is the language as such which limits me . . . The study of language must recognize and honor the phenomenon of freedom, but at the same time trace carefully its limits.\textsuperscript{37}

Deumert interprets Humboldt's understanding of linguistic limitations vs. freedom by stressing the latter: "speakers . . . are not at the mercy of their languages: they are subjects and as such capable of agency and creativity. Individual speech acts simultaneously reproduce and transcend the system in which they operate."\textsuperscript{38} The second feature of Humboldt's philosophy crucial for Russian philology was his privileging of oral speech, and particularly speech in dialogue as the essence of language (Energeia). In Russia at the turn of the century, this concept was articulated as a focus on the "living word" (zhivoe slovo).

The meeting between the Humboldtian philosophy of language and the comparative method was a particularly important moment in the history that I am tracing. This is because there was an incomplete fit between them, and because scholars consequently attempted to reconcile them in different ways. The comparative method worked well with the collective aspect of the philosophy of language, or what Humboldt called Ergon, but the individual, creative part (Energeia) was not easily amenable to the method. The partial solutions that the philologists offered to surmount the rift between the two domains would become building blocks for the Russian Formalists. These included a programmatic methodology (referred to as "poetics"), inherited assumptions regarding the object of study (defined as slovesnost'), and criteria for scholarliness in the field of literary studies.

The Russian Formalists inherited an existing field of study, called the "theory of verbal art" or "poetics" (poetika). In describing his work as "historical poetics," Veselovsky saw his efforts as an improvement on the tradition of poetics associated with Aristotle.\textsuperscript{39} In his 1870 address Veselovsky explains how the comparative method can be applied to the study of literature. This requires that literary works should not be treated as the isolated products of extraordinary individual creativity, of some "great man," but should be situated within a broader domain of popular verbal tradition.\textsuperscript{40} The individual work cannot be the basic unit of analysis in this approach.
Veselovsky explains his perspective with a rhetorical question: “Does not each new poetic epoch work upon images inherited from time immemorial, necessarily operating within their limits, allowing itself only new combinations of the old, and only filling them with that new understanding of life which in fact constitutes its progress over the past?” The history of language provides an affirmative answer:

At least the history of language suggests to us an analogous phenomenon. We do not create a new language, we receive it at birth ready-made, not subject to alteration; the actual changes effected by history do not alter the elemental form of the word, or else alter it so gradually that it occurs undetected by two consecutive generations.41

Literary studies should likewise proceed by identifying, through comparison, the repeating elements in literary history. Veselovsky and others used the term “tradition” (predanie), from the verb “give over” (peredat’), to refer to these repeating elements. Veselovsky’s examples of the content of predanie include forms such as fixed epithets (“white” swan), particular symbols (e.g., a bird, flower, or color), metaphors (comparing clouds with enemies, or a battle with threshing), triadic repetitions, rhetorical devices, and formulas (prophetic dreams, boasts, curses, or typical depictions of battle).42

Veselovsky’s concept of predanie is informed by his study of oral, folkloric genres. Folklore was amenable to the comparative historical method because these corpora (genres of oral verbal art such as tales, songs, or incantations) cluster into types and variants. By the early twentieth century, the dissection of (transcribed) folklore texts into minimal units was an established practice: folktales were understood to be made up of smaller parts, referred to as episodes, motifs, or formulas, which reoccurred in different performances.43 In his work on folkloric material, Veselovsky demonstrated that the comparative method could successfully establish the collective, the rule-bound, and the normative aspects of literary history: those elements which limit the freedom of the individual speaker, according to Humboldt’s model. However, the place of the individual—the source of novelty and creativity—remained an open question for philologists.

Veselovsky would suggest that the individual, creative act remains outside the limits of historical poetics, a research program defined by the comparative method. In lecture notes from the late 1890s, he wrote: “The task of historical poetics, as it appears to me, is to determine the role and the boundaries of tradition [predanie] in the process of personal creation.”44 This articulation echoes Humboldt’s assertion, cited above, that “the study of language must recognize and honor the phenomenon of freedom, but at the same time trace carefully its limits.”45 Veselovsky adds that works of
Introduction

art which contemporaries may find utterly exceptional, may, with time, be revealed to be made up of traditional elements. In a frequently cited passage from his “Poetics of Plots” (“Poetika siuzhetov”), he argues that the plot structures found in folktales are an element of tradition (predanie), and poses the question of whether the comparative study of tradition could produce results for contemporary literature as well:

Contemporary narrative literature with its complex plot structures and photographic representation of reality would seem to nullify the very possibility of such a question; but when for future generations it appears in the same distant perspective, like antiquity for us, from the prehistoric to the middle ages, when the synthesis of time, that great simplifier, passes through the complexity of phenomena, reducing them to the size of points receding into the depths, its lines will converge with those which reveal themselves to us today when we look at the ancient poetic past, and indications of schematism and repetition will emerge along the entire length.46

This text, and the implications of this passage in particular, directly inspired the Formalists’ generation. The seminal narratological contributions of Viktor Shklovsky and Vladimir Propp can be seen as a competition to develop Veselovsky’s proposal. Propp, who was not a member of the Formalist societies, but whose work was likewise informed by the Russian philological paradigm, cited this passage as the last paragraph of his Morphology of the Folktale (Morfologiia skazki, 1928), indicating that he viewed his work as a contribution to Veselovsky’s larger project.

Veselovsky’s argument is not just that methods developed in the study of folklore can be also applied to the study of written literature. The implicit argument shared within the philological paradigm is that folklore and literature should be studied together as manifestations of the same underlying processes. This idea was motivated by Romantic ideology regarding the relationship between a national language, folklore, and written literature. In the Russian tradition, the alliance between these domains was facilitated by the availability of a concept, “verbal art” (slovesnost’), which refers collectively to both popular, oral genres and written literature.47 As Andy Byford points out, slovesnost’ as a category was evoked as a way of “legitimately including folklore in the realm of ‘literature,’ as in the phrase narodnaia slovesnost’.”48 At the turn of the twentieth century, slovesnost’ was used to describe poetic language or discourse in general. Vladimir Dal’s dictionary defines slovesnost’ as “the commonality of verbal works of the people [narod], writing, literature.”49 As this definition suggests, it is a category informed by Romantic nationalist thought, in that it is the verbal art of the “nation” or “folk” (narod).

As the dictionary definition reveals, the notion of slovesnost’ is predi-
cated on a refusal to distinguish between oral and written discourse, so that the term can be interpreted either way. However, scholars of literature working in the philological paradigm tended to embrace an oral understanding of *slovesnost’*. Other discursive categories available to Russian literary scholars at the turn of the century were *pis’mennost’, literatura*, and *poeziia*. The first denoted “writing in general, especially when ‘literariness’ was not an issue.” The second, *literatura*, referred to “published discourse, especially fine, educated writings, though not just fiction and poetry,” and the last term, *poeziia*, referred to “not just verse, but also prose fiction and aesthetic literature in general” (synonymous with *iziashchnaia literatura*, literally “fine literature,” a calque from the French *belles-lettres*). These last two categories (literature and poetry) are probably more familiar as objects of literary studies. Yet, in Russia in the late nineteenth century scholars consciously avoided these categories.

The reasons for this are outlined in Byford’s *Literary Scholarship in Late Imperial Russia*. A nationalist orientation in literary scholarship was driven by scholars’ desire to assert their independence from the state, to view their work as dedicated “to the good of the Russian people,” and to differentiate it from “Western science.” They also defined scholarliness in opposition to journalistic literary criticism. Academics thus often avoided artistic “high” literature and questions of aesthetics, which were seen as the province of journalism, and instead pursued historical, linguistically grounded research. For Russian philologists, academic or scholarly research focused not on “high” literary texts (*belles-lettres*) but rather on a wider range of verbal art, in particular folk poetry, and medieval or early modern writings. These could be described by the term *slovesnost’,* which had the connotation of being “homegrown,” or of the people (*narod*), in contrast to Europeanized *literatura* associated with educated society.

The concept of *slovesnost’* allowed scholars to propose that linguistic and folkloristic research was also relevant for understanding literature, since all verbal art—from a proverb to a novel—could be understood to follow the model of oral speech. This idea is articulated in a 1911 article by Dmitry Ovsianiko-Kulikovsky, a student of Potebnia’s and popularizer of his work. In assessing the merits of Veselovsky’s and Potebnia’s theoretical legacy, which Ovsianiko-Kulikovsky refers to as the “linguistic theory” of verbal art, he writes:

Thanks to Wilhelm Humboldt we know that language is *activity, work*, and that there are many signs or elements of artistry in this work. If you use these elements for the expression of your thoughts, then the phrase you utter, along with many others, is a manifestation of language’s poetic work. *The difference between this manifestation and the “genuine” poetic composition of a poet is*,
in the end, only quantitative. The poet uses more artistic elements than we do, and their very artistry is greater, more suggestive, brighter. It is not hard to see that these differences are not qualitative, and that we are right to classify the compositions of world poetry with the artistic facts of everyday language [obydennaia rech'] of millions of people who cannot be called poets.54

Potebnia and his followers saw speech as an essentially creative act; everyday speech is not qualitatively (but only quantitatively) different from the work of a poet. In sum, the concept of slovesnost’ allowed philologists to move between language, folklore, and written literature, and to apply the comparative method to the entire domain. This method allowed them to identify patterns within verbal traditions, with the understanding that identifying these regular forms reveals the limits on individual creativity. The individual creative will, or moment of inspiration, was understood to be inaccessible to scholarly study.

This combination of method and object of study (slovesnost’) became the definitive criteria of scholarliness (nauchnost’) in Russian academic studies at the turn of the twentieth century. The term nauka, like the German Wissenschaft, is translated into English as “science” or “scholarship” and refers to all systematic intellectual work. In both Russian and German, one can only distinguish between the humanities and the natural sciences by means of the additional adjectives “gumanitarnye nauki” (Geisteswissenschaften) or “estestvennye nauki” (Naturwissenschaften). The concept of scholarliness (nauchnost’), as it was developed by nineteenth-century Russian philologists, was focused on the identification of rules rather than on the description of highly valued individual objects. These rules were not understood as exceptionless laws, but more precisely as historical tendencies.

This philological concept of a science of literature was described in Russia, from the 1860s, as the “theory of verbal art” (teorii slovesnosti).55 As this phrase suggests, to produce “theory” meant to work with the category of slovesnost’. This is reflected in the titles of textbooks on the theory of literature (slovesnost’), such as Educational Theory of Verbal Art (Uchebnaia teorii slovesnosti, N. Minin, St. Petersburg, 1861), Theory of Verbal Art (Teoriia slovesnosti, E. Voskresensky, Moscow, 1888), and Theory of Verbal Art [Teorii slovesnosti] for Secondary School Institutions (P. Smirnovsky, St. Petersburg, 1895). The best-known titles among such a list would be Alexander Potebnia’s published lectures, which appeared with the titles From Notes on the Theory of Verbal Art [teorii slovesnosti]: Poetry and Prose, Tropes and Figures, Poetic and Mythological Thought, Appendix (1905) and From Lectures on the Theory of Verbal Art [teorii slovesnosti]: Fables, Proverbs, Sayings (1894).

The Russian Formalists sought to outdo the philologists in produc-
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ing a “theory” of verbal art. In this context, “theory” can be understood as synonymous with “poetics.” The Formalists referred to their own work as “theory” but also often as “poetics” or “scientific poetics” (nauchnata poetika), as exemplified in the title used for the publications of OPOIAZ: Poetics: Collections on the Theory of Poetic Language (Poetika: Sborniki po teorii poeticheskogo iazyka). Contemporary scholars have seen “theory” in the humanities as originating with Russian Formalism. David Rodowick, for example, comments that the “Russian formalists almost certainly . . . invented ‘theory’ in the modern sense for the humanities.” In some ways this is true, yet I will show that they didn’t really invent the theory that they were working with. More precisely, we can say that they pushed beyond Veselovsky and Potebnia to explain modern literature, using the framework provided by the philological paradigm. Their work can be described as a series of efforts to negotiate between scholarly (comparative) poetics and the “individual” element of verbal production described by Humboldt as Energeia. OPOIAZ theory did this by focusing on the individual author’s performance (chapter 2). Shklovsky delved deeper into the psychology of creativity through his creative/theoretical writings, such as ZOO (chapter 3), and Jakobson and the Moscow Linguistic Circle stressed the capacity of individuals to consciously innovate in their language usage (chapter 4). The imperative to understand this relationship between the general rules, or accumulated traditions, and the individual act of creativity was, moreover, increasingly charged with political meaning in the early twentieth century, as the concepts of “collective” and “individual” were scrutinized and reinterpreted in the revolutionary period.