

Pauline and Irving Tanner Dean's Scholars Research Proposal

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Abstract

Theories in literary criticism (such as formalism, feminism, deconstructionism, etc.) have an important impact on academic methodology by guiding the analysis of literary texts. One theory which is, I believe, under-regarded by most literary critics is Russian formalism, in the style of Roman Jakobson; in it, one considers the function of language as a formal system, key to producing the effects of works of literature. For example, formalist criticism focuses on the internal structure of language and the effect it has on the reader's perception of a work, highlighting the importance of grammatical and phonetic linguistic effects which produce meaning beyond the referential meanings carried by words.

I am interested in studying Russian formalism as a critical tool applied to poetry, particularly in combination with other theories. I am especially curious about the role formal elements play in evaluating and making judgments about poems. While evaluation is highly subjective, what can the formal structure of poetic language tell us about evaluation of literary works and of critical theories? For example, since different critical frameworks can ascribe drastically different meanings to one poem, could formalist analysis help to evaluate the closeness of the fit between the text of the poem and a reading informed by a particular type of criticism? (This idea is inspired by the M.H. Abrams essay "Five Types of Lycidas," which considers the drastically different possible readings of a poem.) Conversely, to what extent are the patterns found through formalist readings dependent on other critical preconceptions? If a formalist analysis is done within the context of another theoretical framework, what effect does that have on the apparent effects of the language? Also, because formal elements clearly have a large effect on the strength or weakness of a poem, how can we understand better what makes us approve of or disapprove of a poem?

I plan to study these questions at Cornell, using the resources of the library and faculty, working with Prof. Roger Gilbert (English) and Prof. Jonathan Culler (Comparative Literature). I am also planning to work with Prof. Linda Waugh (French, Italian, English, Arizona State University), who is an expert on Russian formalism. In addition to theoretical library research, I hope to apply my findings to analyzing poetic texts, including, I hope, some by living poets whom I can talk to about how they construct poems. My eventual goal is an honors thesis for the English department studying these critical issues in poetry.

Biographical Sketch

A fascination with formal patterns has characterized my otherwise highly divergent academic interests since I was quite young. For most of my life in elementary and high school, I was certain that I was going to be a mathematician. I was captivated by the structure and logic of mathematics, and that interest grew as I encountered proofs and the formal logical structures that make doing mathematics possible. My interest in science blossomed at the same time, as I tried to understand everything I could about how the natural world worked. Still, I loved humanities, drawn in by analytical historical and literary arguments. My family life probably contributed to my eclectic academic interests – I grew up an only child in a normal suburb of Chicago, but my father is a physicist and my mother has a Ph.D. in linguistics, so from the start, academics and wide varieties of academic thought were around my house.

When I was in seventh grade, I decided I was going to learn how to write sonnets. My primary reason was that they were the hardest poetic form I could think of (I had already learned about haiku a couple of years earlier), and I was captivated by the challenge of saying something meaningful within the strict constraints of a highly structured poem.

Throughout my high school education, my fascination with learning was propelled by a passion for understanding and clearly describing the patterns and structure of whatever subject I was studying, whether it was English, economics, or music theory. Over three summers in high school (and one in college) I worked for a neutrino physics experiment at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory and learned how to do experimental research and make sense of data, physical models, and computer languages. At the same time, wonderful AP History and AP English teachers led me to learn to love making (and understanding) rhetorical arguments, and I used my interest in grammatical structure to learn French, Spanish, and Latin in school.

This passion for logic and structure still drives my interests in diverse subjects now, and has led me to a double major in English and mathematics. While I entered Cornell absolutely certain that I wanted to study math, my interests in literature and languages blossomed over my first year at the same time as my interest in math grew. At the same time that I was learning how to understand complicated arguments in literary theory, I drew on the skills of logical reasoning that I was honing in math classes – and found myself frustrated when theoretical explanations failed to live up to the mathematical rigor I wanted to subject them to! Of course, theorizing in the humanities requires a different type of understanding and of argument than the relatively simple clarity of mathematics, since literary arguments are rarely clear-cut, but the same type of interesting analytical thought was required in both areas. During my Cornell career, my academic interests have turned more towards literary theory, literature in general, and poetry in particular, although I still find math and the sciences fascinating. As I continue in literary studies, I hope to draw on the rigorous logic and scientific arguments that I've learned through my interest in many disciplines in order to strengthen my literary analysis, and my understanding of the structure and effects of literary texts.

Statement of Purpose

What makes poetry poetic? The first things we think of as “poetic” tend to be formal: rhyme, meter, and lineation within the text. As more modern poets have pushed boundaries against traditional poetic styles, however, the question of what defines poetry becomes more complicated, but the form of a poem remains key to its inclusion in a corpus of “poetry.” Our use of the word “poetic” in contexts outside of written poems bolsters the connotations of form and structure it has. We talk about “poetic justice” to represent justice that seems highly appropriate, not because such justice conventionally occurs in the corpus of English poems, but because it suggests a formal mirroring of punishment to crime like the formal mirroring, often grammatical or linguistic, that distinguishes poetry from prose.

Linguist Roman Jakobson gives poetry a more explicit definition: he describes the poetic function of a linguistic message as the one in which the message describes itself (paraphrased from Waugh, “The Poetic Function in the Theory of Roman Jakobson,” listed below in the bibliography). The extent to which a text is poetic depends on the extent to which it talks about how it works. In other words, a poetic text is one in which the words of the text are not only describing a situation in the real world (the referential function of language), but are also providing information about the structure of the text itself. This is an abstract, highly theoretical formulation of what makes a text poetic, but it echoes things we understand intuitively about poetry: as Alexander Pope writes in “An Essay on Criticism,” “the sound must seem an echo to the sense” in a poem. The relation between what a text says and how it says it determines how poetic it is. If the form and meaning of a text are closely related, then the words relating to the meaning of the poem will also shed some light on its structure, so the text will function poetically in Jakobson’s sense. This is a simple example of a more complicated phenomenon that needs more study as a defining characteristic of poetry. How does this “poetic function” of language work in general, and in what ways is it realized through the formal elements of a poem that we draw on in discussing poetry?

Various other theorists have drawn on Jakobson’s work, and Russian Formalism relates to Structuralist ideas, as well as others. While my theoretical focus will be Formalism, primarily as exemplified in the work of Jakobson and linguists who worked with him such as Linda Waugh, I also plan to study the ways that theoretical interpretations of poetry have

moved away from strict Formalism, while maintaining a focus on elements of language in poetry. I think that considering elements of more modern theories, like Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, which describe how language works will help me to understand better the functioning of formal elements in poems. By broadening my theoretical base, I hope to make use of the elements of Russian Formalism that are most effective in analysis, while also considering other descriptions of language that make sense of different formal features or make sense of formal features in different ways.

My interest stems specifically from the way these theories work (and sometimes fail to make sense) when applied to actual poems. While the theories are interesting philosophically for the effects they produce as independent thought, I want to focus on the connections between the theoretical statements and the actual work of poets, and to see both how the theories can inform my reading of the texts and how the texts can modify my understanding of the theories. My experience in science has taught me both to look for theories that make sense of how things work and to see how general theories fit together logically and reflect the evidence at hand. In the case of poetry, that translates to a desire both to understand some of how we can apply our understanding of language to understand the effects of linguistic patterns in poetry and to consider the conclusions of theoretical explanations in relation to close and critical readings of the texts they are trying to represent.

I also believe that formal structure has a great effect on our reception of the poem as readers, so I think understanding how to apply Russian Formalism (and other critical strategies that focus on form) to poetic texts bears on the question of evaluation of poetry. If formal elements and the formal functioning of language help to distinguish poetry from prose, can they also help distinguish a good poem from bad one? While there is no way to definitively answer the question of evaluation, I hope to consider how the formal basis of evaluation might function, and how different formal structures might work with figurative and semantic structures in the poem in ways that help or hinder its reception by readers. For example, while formalism cannot determine if a poem is “good,” it may be able to speak on the question of whether it paints a coherent picture or works against itself. In various contexts, those choices might factor differently into an evaluation of the poem, but they will certainly have an effect. Also, there are certain kinds of verse that are generally written off as “doggerel” or not as real, high-art poetry, and those distinctions seem to be often based on form. Right now, poems that fit strict metrical and rhyme schemes are not viewed as being

as serious as more free verse, whereas the opposite was true 200 years ago. Jakobson suggests in his essay “The Dominant” that the “dominant,” or most-valued, formal features of poetry are culturally determined. How has the value we place on certain features of poetry changed over time, and how has that affected our evaluation of different poems? We seem to have a different standard for poems written at different times, looking for free verse in modern texts but blank verse in 17th century ones. What do we find compelling about poems that presumably satisfy formal mores of previous centuries? Why do we continue to judge the classics as classic? I hope that studying the effects of formal structures in poems from various eras will help to shed some light on the differences in how we evaluate poems from different periods and, conversely, on what elements seem to be valued at different times. What are the basic things that we look for in poetry, that do not change with the centuries? While I have not yet chosen the specific poems that I want to build my own analysis on, I hope to use a widely diachronic range, possibly including works in Middle and Old English (both of which I have studied at Cornell) in order to look into these questions.

While as critics we build theories on the basis of patterns in texts and then try to understand texts better through our theories, poets do very different work, presumably drawing on the same linguistic patterns that we try to identify in creating their work, but not necessarily consciously. In addition to studying the works of criticism and theory describing the functioning of poetry and applying that work to a body of poems, I would also like to look into the question of how the construction of poems by their authors relates to and differs from their deconstruction by their readers and critics. As part of my research into this question, I plan to include a series of conversations with poet Stephanie Gehring (Cornell MFA in Poetry, 2006) centering on my views of the way her poems work (as a reader and a critic) and her descriptions of what went into their construction. I think that by including works by a living poet at Cornell in my analysis and being able to talk with her about the applications of formalist theory to her work, I will be able to better understand the ways in which formalist ideas are instantiated in the work of poets, and hopefully gain some understanding that will also help me with my analysis of older poems by authors who are not available to clarify their work.

I also plan on using other resources at Cornell in order to pursue this project. I expect the bulk of my research to consist of library research, to understand the theoretical structures of formalism that I will be working with, as well as to see what previous attempts

at this kind of analysis have revealed and the changes those have had on theoretical ways of approaching texts. Additionally, by studying past attempts to define and understand the formal elements of poetry and their function, both within a strictly formalist theoretical context and growing from other frameworks of considering poetry, I hope to gain knowledge of the tools that I will need to use in order to productively perform my own analyses on poems to better understand the poems and, eventually, the theories underpinning my analyses.

I also plan to work with Prof. Roger Gilbert (English) and Prof. Jonathan Culler (Comparative Literature), experts in poetry and critical theory, to help direct my research and refine my analyses so they shed light on particularly interesting aspects of poetic writing and theorizing. I have also been in contact with Prof. Linda Waugh (Arizona State University, Depts. of French, Italian, and English) an expert on Russian Formalism, and I plan to continue working with her to refine my ideas as well. I hope to use the research I conduct over this summer as the basis for an English honors thesis studying critical issues in poetry (based on my research and my own analyses of a certain number of poems that I have not yet chosen).

Poetry is a highly refined form of language, so it provides a useful laboratory for studying the way that language can affect our emotions and our perceptions. We are linguistic creatures, and live in a world governed by language; we cannot separate ourselves from our linguistic understanding of the world and our linguistic communication with others. Within literature, and especially within poetry, we experience some of the most powerful human emotions and experiences, which are transmitted to us through the language of the text. How can a symbolic system based on mostly arbitrary relations between ideas and the signs representing them have such power to transport emotions and experiences from a writer to a reader? How does a created system of language invoke real feelings and real experiences? We vocalize all of our experience and all of our understanding through language, so it has great effects on our ability to express ourselves in the world and to relate to others. By better understanding how language works in poetry, I hope to better understand the function of language and the transfer of experiences that it makes possible through literature.

My experience in math and the sciences has had a great effect on the way I think, and at some level, the project I want to undertake this summer is a scientific one – as

scientists study how the world works, I want to try and peer into the mysteries of how poetry works. Scientists look for general theories that describe the phenomena they see, and I would like to study how theories of literature and language can illuminate the effects evident in poetry. The analysis of literature can never be a truly scientific endeavor, since any analysis is highly subjective, but by drawing on the tools and experiences of science and by turning my interest in patterns to a study of how those patterns work in literature, I hope to find a partial answer to the question, "How does poetry work?"

Bibliography

Some of these works are specifically works about Russian Formalism, while many of the others are more general critical works about poetry and specifically about formal elements in poetry, since a general understanding of the way form is seen to work in poetry is extremely important for doing any sort of Formalist analysis, and going beyond strict Formalism to other ways that form can be analyzed in poetry. Some of the works were written before modern theories directed the analysis of poetry (but still may contain useful tools for analyzing poems that will work within a modern theoretical framework, while others are based on modern theories, many of which grew out of Formalism.

On Russian Formalism:

Jakobson, Roman. *Language in Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1987.

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Jakobson, Roman and Linda Waugh. "The Spell of the Speech Sound." *The Sound Shape of Language*. 1979.

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Waugh, Linda. "The Poetic Function in the Theory of Roman Jakobson." *Poetics Today* 2.1a, 25-39, 1980.

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General books on poetry, especially formal elements:

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Bateson, F. W. *English Poetry and the English Language*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934

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Brooke-Rose, Christine. *The Grammar of Metaphor*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1958.

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- Wesling, Donald. *The Chances of Rhyme: Device and Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- . *The Scissors of Meter: Grammetrics and Reading*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.

Budget

I am seeking funding to cover approximately two months' expenses living in Ithaca (I expect to be here from June on through the summer, which is closer to two months than three), as well as to purchase books. My rent will be \$562.50/month (in my apartment which has a lease through August), and my utilities come to about \$60/month. I estimate that I need about \$250/month for food. Miscellaneous costs should cover transportation and other living expenses that might come up, but also paper and copying costs, etc.

rent: $\$562.50 \times 2 = 1125$

utilities: $\$60 \times 2 = 120$

food: $\$250 \times 2 = 500$

books: \$300

miscellaneous: \$200

total: \$2245

My faculty advisor for the project will be Roger Gilbert (English). He is currently on leave, but is sending a letter of recommendation separately.

I hereby waive my right to see my letter of recommendation.

Hannah Newfield-Plunkett