

Sense and Humor in Russian Formalism. Part II

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Abstract. The first part of this article demonstrated the utmost importance of humor, gaiety, and interplay to such leading Russian Formalists as Viktor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynianov, and Boris Eikhenbaum. The humorous largely determined the way the Formalists discussed literature as such. And yet, when they turned to the problem of humor proper, they largely explained humor away. Shklovsky's "Towards a Theory of the Comic" analyzed humor "geometrically," showing that the structure of funny stories [*anekdoty*] does not guarantee humor — for example, when the same constructions are found in "serious" works. Shklovsky's statement that being a tragedy is not the most important thing about *King Lear* bespoke the same approach that manifested itself in his theory of humor. Humor was reduced in it to a mere construction, and while literature was merry to the Formalists (as it has been shown in the first part of the article), humor as such was for them nothing more than a particular example of the literary, without the comic, or some other psychological, aspect considered its prerequisite. However unsatisfactory this may be, such an understanding is legitimate, being rooted in the history of the term "humor." Nevertheless, this must not beg the question: if we take humor in the colloquially-dominant sense of the word that implies psychology (the multiplicity of our interpretations thereof notwithstanding), can we say that the Formalists did justice to *this* phenomenon? Humor advanced their literary theory, but did they advance the theory of humor? Whether they did or not is for the reader to decide, whereas the argument made of this article is that, having exposed the construction of humor, the Formalists deconstructed this phenomenon, which appears to be a vivid example not of a theory of humor but rather of a humorous theory.

Keywords: Andrei Bely; Bakhtin; Bergson; comedy; comic; construction; Digital Humanities; Eikhenbaum; formal cause; gaiety; Gogol; interplay; joke; McLuhan; meaning; medium is the message; merry; *Opoyaz*; Ortega y Gasset; *ostranenie*; parody; psychologism; reversibility; Russian Formalism; Schillinger; Shklovsky; teleology; tragedy; Tynianov; *vnenakhodimost'*; Yarkho; *zaum'*.

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"It would do us good to introduce, in addition to the notion of a working hypothesis, that of a working error."

—Lydia Ginzburg

"I was forced to recall [. . .] that vision of the old wiseacre when he laughed so inhumanly and played his joke on me in the fashion of the immortals. For the first time I understood [his] laughter, the laughter of the immortals. It was a laughter without an object. It was simply light and lucidity. It was that which is left over when a true man has passed through all the sufferings, vices, mistakes, passions and misunderstandings of men and got through to eternity and the world of space. And eternity was nothing else than the redemption of time, its return to innocence, so to speak, and its transformation again into space."

—Hermann Hesse

4. Literature as a Joke

An avid reader of the *Opoyaz* Formalists¹ is likely, sooner or later, to chance upon an interesting contradiction in their general tone.² On one hand, Viktor Shklovsky, as well as Yuri Tynianov and Boris Eikhenbaum, seem to write lightly of literary works and their authors. That is, they make light of, or treat as less important at best, that which other critics, however unlike, consider to be the essence of literature. This essence has to do with authorial design and some noble and serious purpose to which it was directed, co-determining the place the work and its author, and readership occupy in the general evolution of ideas, as well as the socioeconomic and other anthropological practices, within a civilization. On the other hand, the *Opoyazians* sound serious when literature and art are discussed *as such* (the first part of this article should have provided multiple examples thereof). Everything is in question to the *Opoyazians*: the authors', characters', and readers' beliefs and values—everything but the import and primacy of literary interplay, everything save the gaiety of literature.

The first part of this article illustrated it by juxtaposing the *Opoyazians*' ideas with those of their opponents, including Mikhail Bakhtin, perhaps the greatest among them. Teleology-oriented, Bakhtin approaches jokes seriously. Humor's breaking free from the tyranny of society's values and responsibilities is the most eloquent confirmation of the axiological and the purposeful, which underlie Bakhtin's theory. His own words serve as a testimony: "Someone among our composers said: do you know merry [*veselyi*] music? I don't know merry music, and essentially, there is and can be no merry poetry. [. . .] Otherwise, it will be silly, childish glee [*teiachii vostorg*]" (Bakhtin and Duvakin 2002, p. 183). Mark the word *veselyi* (gay, merry), discussed at length with regard to the Formalists in the first part of this article.

Conversely, it is the merry play of literature with itself that is the essence of Gogol's "The Overcoat" according to Eikhenbaum and of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* according to Shklovsky.³ All else—psychological and ideological—is only attendant. An unwitting reader with a clear but practical mind may, upon following Shklovsky and Eikhenbaum's arguments, frown or, better yet, begin to laugh—so unexpected and whimsical these arguments should seem to him. That, however, has to do with the fact that humor to the *Opoyazians* is self-valuable, while to a practical mind, it is not.⁴ From the *Opoyaz* point of view, humor and gaiety need not be rooted in something "serious" because they already are that.

¹ *Opoyaz* stands for the Society for the Study of the Theory of Poetic Language—the name of the literary group to representative of the Petrograd wing of Russian Formalism, with Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eikhenbaum, and Yuri Tynianov among its leaders. Some aspects of the institutional history of the *Opoyaz*, germane to the subject of humor, are discussed in the first part of this article.

² The attitude to be inferred from that tone is no less important than direct statements. Many a scholar has been focusing on the message of the Formalists without considering the context of its medium.

³ Cf. the first part of this article, section "The Means of Meaning: Humor vs. Teleology."

⁴ Cf. Luigi Pirandello's essay on humor (1908, 1920) (Pirandello 1966, p. 50):

While a sociologist describes social life as he objectively observes it, the humorist, armed with his sharp intuition, shows and reveals how appearances are vastly different from what goes on in his associates' unconscious. Indeed we lie psychologically just as we lie socially. Lying to ourselves by living consciously only on the surface of our psychological being is a result of the social lie. [. . .]

The humorist knows well that the pretense of logic is much greater in us than real logical coherence, because if we feign logic, the logic of our actions reveals the logic of our thoughts by showing that it is fiction to believe in its absolute sincerity. [. . .]

And is the rapport that we make with reason always sincere, when with it, with rigorously logical reason, we enunciate our respect and love for established ideals? Is the pure, the unselfish reason always the only and true source of ideals and of that perseverance which maintains them? Isn't it correct, rather, to suspect that sometimes ideals are supported not by objective and rational criteria but by special affective impulses and obscure tendencies?

This, however, creates a problem when the *Opoyazians* theorize about the comic itself. For an *Opoyazian* takes humor so seriously that he does not dispense with the humorous attitude when he turns to humor as an object of his analysis. This may be reminiscent of a vicious circle, but it is not, logically speaking; rather, that is a case of auto-reflexivity,⁵ so typical of the Formalists. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde's preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the *Opoyaz* theory of humor is "the [out]rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass" (Wilde 1908, p. 5) This said, it is now time we turned to the special *Opoyaz* theory of humor.

Shklovsky's "Towards a Theory of the Comic"⁶ is the sole *Opoyaz* study exclusively devoted to humor. As always, the thing for which Shklovsky is looking is literature's literariness. Meanwhile, with humor there is always a danger of diverging from the specificity of the text and lapsing into reader-response psychologism, for humor can easily be evoked by the peculiar psychological predisposition of an individual rather than the specific features of the object. As Aaron Smuts aptly put it, "What amounts to a humor response is different from what makes something humorous" (Smuts 2006, p. 82). Consequently, Shklovsky's first task in writing about the comic is to separate the wheat of construction from the chaff of personalized perception.

Yet, *Opoyaz* dismissal of "psychologism" notwithstanding,⁷ Shklovsky initially supports his claims by referring to people's reactions, and, in doing so, like Eikhenbaum, seems to betray (albeit temporarily so) his bias against tears and in favor of laughter. Thus, Shklovsky begins with an anecdote about Russian peasants' watching *Hamlet* staged by the poet Alexander Blok, who also played the leading role. During the performance, the peasants burst out laughing repeatedly at the grimaces of the Prince of Denmark, especially during the most gripping moments. No lesson is drawn from the anecdote at this point. Instead, Shklovsky mentions other similar instances: "I'd heard this laughter many times in Petersburg theaters of 1919-1920. People laughed at the most dramatic moments. For example, when Othello was strangling Desdemona. Meanwhile, theater had its visitors, people were fond of theater, and theater was discussed in the barracks" (Shklovsky 1922, p. 57).

At the end of the essay, Shklovsky returns to *Hamlet* and, unsurprisingly, draws a surprising conclusion: "I do not think that the peasants laughing at *Hamlet* misunderstood it. / They perceived the artistic form of the drama but in a different key [*v inom kliuche*]" (*ibid.*, p. 66).⁸

The musical analogy makes more sense should we compare it with an excerpt from Shklovsky's earlier text "Cinematography as Art" (1919). In it, he says that J. S. Bach wrote obscene couplets for the same music he had set to the psalms (it should be added many of

⁵ Hansen-Löve writes about auto-reflexivity as one of the *Opoyazians*' greatest achievements: "To a degree, [the Formalists] managed [...] to 'punch above their weight,' i.e., methodologically to reflect upon a given theoretical position [...] with the help of an evolutionarily and communicatively more complex theoretical position (to reflect on the reflection), and this achievement of theirs is hard to overestimate" (Hansen-Löve 2001, p. 493). Cf. Lvoff 2015, pp. 25–26.

⁶ "K teorii komicheskago" (mark the prerevolutionary orthography) was published in 1922 in Andrei Bely's Moscow and Berlin literary journal *Epoieia*.

⁷ Cf. the first part of this article, section "*Opoyaz* Anti-Psychologism and the Benefit of the Joke."

⁸ Surely, common sense suggests that laughing at "the slings and arrows" of the hero's "outrageous fortune" is shallow, of not asinine—though, it may be argued, the twentieth century did exactly that, in Beckett's *Endgame*, for example. Yet the preceding analysis of Eikhenbaum's and Shklovsky's essays about "The Overcoat" and *Don Quixote*, respectively, should have established already the kind of meaning that is literary and does not hinge on a variety of extra-textual meanings considered as commonsensical in our everyday life. Moreover, if we accept and even favor the Romantics' "posthumous" interpretation of Don Quixote as a predominantly tragic hero, why cannot Hamlet as a character be considered if not entirely comedic, then at least partially that? Aren't his desperate puns just a step away from Mercutio's eccentric ones? Furthermore, what if someone finds Molière's plays to be sad? Isn't it sad, for instance, that the main hero of *The Imaginary Invalid* pays for his stupidity by losing a wife, with whom he is besotted?

these drew on traditional, popular tunes). "It shows," Shklovsky continues, "that a sequence [*riad*] of sounds, arranged in a certain way and called music, is not endowed with some emotional content, and when someone attaches that to music, music has nothing to do with it" (Shklovsky 1919, n. pag.) Shklovsky develops this thought in his 1923 book *Literature and Cinematography* (Shklovsky 1923, p. 4):

A work of music consists of a series of sounds of different pitch and timbre, i.e., high and low sounds following one another. These sounds are brought together in groups, and the groups have a certain relationship to each other. There is nothing else in the work of music. So what did we find in it? We did not find form and content but only material and form, i.e., the sounds and the disposition of sounds. Of course, there will be people who will say that there is also content in music, and that that is its sad [*grusnyi*] or gay [*veselyi*] mood. But there are facts that prove that in the musical work itself, there is no sadness or joy—these feelings are not the essence of music, and they are not what the composers hold dear.

Let us, however, not be distracted by music proper: this is a problem for a separate study.⁹ What is of paramount import, as far as the topic of this article is concerned, is the fact that Shklovsky does not place the sad or the gay in form.¹⁰ Following this logic, one is likely to conclude: the comic and the tragic are both exterior to form—yet the problem is that Shklovsky writes about the form of the comic, as will be demonstrated in a moment. We have thus run into another *Opoyaz* contradiction in which habitual terms are employed outside of their general use.

One thing is certain: the comic in literature is at stake for Shklovsky, not the comic in and of itself—be it the author's or the reader's. But is it possible to separate one from another? A metaphor, say, or a synecdoche will always remain itself, even when there is no one to recognize it as such, not a living soul. But if, let us assume, the comic is not recognized as comic at all (from the standpoint of functional, stimulus, or response theories of humor),¹¹ can we still speak of a certain construction or device as comic because of its construction? Had Shklovsky defined the comic, this question would be much easier to answer, but evading exhaustive definitions is typical of the *Opoyazians*, whose core concept of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization, estrangement) fundamentally withstands systematization.¹² With provocative audacity and negligence, Shklovsky refuses to give a definition of the comic already at the very beginning of the essay: "Should a joke [*anekdot*] be funny? / What is the difference between the comic [*smeshnoe*] and tragic? / I don't know" (Shklovsky 1922, p. 57). It could, however, be added that Shklovsky is reluctant to answer these questions prior to analyzing humor in literature; doing this would be an aesthetic act, fraught with violating the supremacy of literature's literariness; instead, Shklovsky proceeds from particular texts and examples, whose implicit questions may be very different from the ones we form a priori. But let us return to the original problem and see where Shklovsky is led by his attempt to subtract psychologism from the comic in literature.

Shklovsky writes that "the tragic and comic perception are closer to one another than thought" and that the same work "may be conceived as tragic and perceived as comic, as well as the other way round" (*ibid.*, pp. 57–58). To prove this point about a blurry line between "[t]he tragic and comic perception," Shklovsky tells the bloodthirsty jokes of the Russian

⁹ Cf. the appendix B to this article. As far as the particular problem of humor in music is concerned, cf. Brent-Smith (1927), Grew (1934a, 1934b, 1934c, 1934d, 1934e), Mull (1949), Humphrey (1971), Dalmonte (1995), Hinson (2000), and Arias (2001).

¹⁰ It is important not to confuse this gaiety, which is an emotion of the soul, with the gaiety that the *Opoyazians* ascribed to literature; the latter kind has to do with literature's not taking things seriously and its unceremoniously grabbing our human thoughts, for which we care so much, to experiment and toy with them.

¹¹ Cf. Smuts 2006.

¹² Cf. fn. 13 and fn. 15 in the first part of this article.

Civil War: "A man is being led to the firing squad. It's raining and cold outside. He says, 'What nasty weather.' / The escort answers, 'You should worry! I'm the one to walk back in it'" (*ibid.*, p. 65). Another joke is as noir: "A Jew is being led to the firing squad. He asks, 'What day is it?' 'Monday.' 'You don't say! And that's just the start of the week'" (*ibid.*). Of course, one could speak here about Jewish, or gallows, humor and revisit Freud's treatment of the subject, which could be reconciled with Shklovsky's interpretation, but Shklovsky is after something else than psychology or anthropology. As we already know, he is interested in the construction of the joke as such. What matters to him is that, as far as the literary function of these jokes is concerned, they are not fundamentally different from some others that, unlike these, are not bloodthirsty. Such is the joke Shklovsky tells about two Soviet profiteers who decide to talk about money on the phone by referring to millions as horses, for secrecy's sake: "'Send me three horses, please.' 'I have not one horse.' 'But I can't go on living without horses.' 'All right, I'll send you a horse and a half'" (*ibid.*, p. 62). In the joke about horses and millions, the principle is the same; Shklovsky calls it "semantic [*smyslovoi*] contradiction" (*ibid.*, p. 63). Horses and millions are of different semantic orders, yet we cause them to collide, like words in a pun—and, one could add, this evokes aesthetic enjoyment in us, the feeling of play, while fascination with play makes us disregard the details. That is why we are likelier to laugh than cry at the joke with a Jew led to the firing squad. The reason is the same: it is not the individual that interests us but the situation (again, Bergson's theory comes to mind). Indeed, Shklovsky's special treatment of humor pursues the same objective as in his other works. The objective is to take our eyes off the tenor and see the vehicle, off content and see the medium, which now is considered the true message.

However persuasive and coherent, this train of thought creates a bigger problem that threatens the *Opoyazians'* theory of humor, nay, their entire doctrine. The logic goes as follows. First, without defining it, the *Opoyazians* celebrate humor in works of literature, largely because they want to downplay the psychologically-motivated meaning gravitating towards the seriousness of the work. Then it is humor's turn to be dissected: once again, the constructive essence of literature has to be demonstrated, and so humor has to be treated accordingly, without any "psychology." Finally, when Shklovsky strips humor of everything else but its construction, it turns out that his definitions of a humorous construction and any other construction are the same.

Thus, he writes the following about the abovementioned jokes (or anecdotes, as Russians call them): "Jokes [...] operate not with things but the relationship of things [*otnoshenie veshchei*]. [...] / Things by themselves do not mean anything in a joke. / The juxtaposition [*sopostavlenie*] of things is what matters" (*ibid.*, p. 66). Suffice it to compare this quotation with Shklovsky's definition of the literary work, given slightly earlier in his essay on Vasily Rozanov (Shklovsky 1929, p. 226):

A literary work is pure form; it is not a thing, nor material, but a relationship of materials [*otnoshenie materialov*]. And, as any relationship, this one, too, is a relationship of the zero dimension. That is why the scale, the arithmetic significance of the work's numerator and denominator, is unimportant. Comic [*shutlivyi*], tragic, universal, and indoor works of art—the juxtapositions of a world with a world or of a cat with a stone—are all equal to each other.

Thus, both definitions — that of the comic and that of literature — boil down to the abovementioned *Opoyaz* idea of relationality, interplay. Of course, we see the difference between a text that is funny and a text that is not, but whether we laugh or cry is elective from the standpoint of literature; it is not of principle importance should *Hamlet* be *taken* as a tragedy; let it be *taken* otherwise, as long as its unique organization remains intact. Humor and its opposite, in the psychological sense, are perfectly reversible; humor understood as a construction is but a lever that makes the reversion possible; for different reasons (psychological ones), we react to certain instances of leverage with laughter, but this does not

change how the lever of literature works—be it a joke or an elegy. This reversibility, which is latent in the *Opoyaz* definition of literature, is the reason why Tynianov writes about parody (overwhelmingly associated with the comic) as a certain ratio, a “dialectical play with the device,” when “a tragedy can parody a comedy” just as well (Tynianov 1977, p. 201).¹³

However unorthodox, the *Opoyaz* Formalists were not alone in approaching humor geometrically, as it were. An approach to the comic with a similar outcome, albeit very different premises, can be found in the work of the Moscow Formalist Boris Yarkho (one of, if not the first, of literary scholars to have employed, methodically at that, both statistics and evolutionary biology in their study of literature).¹⁴ Yarkho’s 1937 paper *Corneille’s Comedies and Tragedies: A Study in Genre Theory* is based on a statistical analysis of dozens of tragedies and comedies (obviously, not Corneille’s alone); unlike the *Opoyaz* Formalists, Yarkho is not sated with brilliant insights. The goal of the *Opoyazians* is to demonstrate the formal autonomy of literature, whatever topic they write on — in this case, humor. Yarkho’s aim is not simply to demonstrate but to prove numerically the difference between comedy and tragedy.¹⁵

Yarkho may be not as radical as the *Opoyazians* to deny outright the commonplace psychological distinction between tragedy and comedy: “Generally speaking, we all agree with Aristotle in that the attribute of tragedy is ‘seriousness’ and that of comedy, ‘the laughable’ [*smeshnoi*]” (Yarkho 2006, p. 412). Yet he is not satisfied with this explanation, and the questions he asks show how shaky the foundation for the distinction actually is. Given the fact that Yarkho is yet to be translated into English, may a lengthy quotation be pardoned:

¹³ Even such a devotee of *Opoyaz* theory as Vladimir Novikov, the author of a well-known monograph on parody, objects to the possibility of “humorless” parody. Novikov agrees with Tynianov in that a parody may have “comicality” in it merely as an “entertainment side dish” (Novikov 1989, p. 87), whereas the main, hidden, intent of a parody, the one that has to do with the aesthetic quality of its object, is often “clever” and “serious” (*ibid.*, p. 86). Yet, unlike Tynianov, Novikov believes that parody still remains comic, even when it evokes “a smile” instead of rumbustious laughter (*ibid.*). Novikov writes about parody proper; that is why he singles it out by insisting on the comic; as for Tynianov, even when examining parody, it is literature as such that he writes of eventually. Apparently, Novikov thinks so too when he acknowledges that “Tynianov was primarily interested in parody as a mirror of literary evolution” (*ibid.*, p. 88).

¹⁴ Cf. Pilshchikov 2011. Yarkho is one of the leading figures of my dissertation “The Problem of Literary Development in Russian Formalism and Digital Humanities,” still in progress at the moment of my writing this article.

¹⁵ According to Gasparov, the difference between the *Opoyaz* Formalists, based in Petrograd, and the Moscow Formalists, to whom Yarkho belonged, consisted in that the former believed in convincingness [*ubeditel’nost’*] and the latter, in demonstrability [*dokazatel’nost’*] (Gasparov 1990, p. 14):

Yarkho proceeded from the methodology previously elaborated by positivism with regard to folkloristic, ancient, and mediaeval materials: the singling out of distinctive traits, statistics, systematization—all of this resulting in statistically describing some particular relics of the past and in reconstructing the process underlying them. Conversely, the *Opoyazians* proceeded from the lively sensation of the literary process contemporary to them [. . .] Why did Tynianov [. . .] become an *Opoyazian*? Simply put, he had a good artistic intuition and too little of [. . .] punctilious diligence [. . .] There are two different things: convincingness and demonstrability. Convincingness appeals to intuition, to general impression; demonstrability appeals to the rational mind.

It has to be pointed out that Gasparov considered himself a follower of the Moscow Formalists. Meanwhile, this is what Lydia Ginzburg, a famous student of the *Opoyaz* Formalists, wrote on the same topic in a private letter: “The thoughts expressed in your last letter are largely convincing. I only do not agree with your belief in the ‘coefficient of demonstrability.’ It seems to me that literary history cannot be *demonstrable* [*dokazatel’nyi*] (the factual aspect put aside); it ought to be convincing [*ubeditel’nyi*]. This is very different” (Chukovsky, Ginzburg and Gurvich 2017, p. 165).

What is to be serious in a tragedy? Setting serious goals and overcoming serious obstacles [. . .]? Yet the aim of many tragedies is coming together with the beloved woman and the obstacle, the parents and rivals' resistance, but that is also what constitutes the plot of most comedies. The seriousness of the social or psychological question at issue? But what can be more serious than the social theme of *The Inspector General*?¹⁶ [. . .]

Perhaps seriousness is determined negatively, as an absence of the laughable? But, to a certain extent, the laughable obtains in many tragedies (in Shakespeare, in A[leksey Konstantinovich] Tolstoy) and is rather unevenly represented in comedies. [. . .] This teaches us first and foremost that, apart from qualitative changeability, quantitative one matters and that [literature's] properties are to be studied not only for their nature but also for their measurements [*propertsii*].

Moreover, the presence of the comic has not always been considered the attribute of comedy. Thus, the French Academy calls Corneille's *Le Cid* in its review a "tragi-comedy," even though even though there is not a single laughable situation in that play and not one laughable expression either.

Whether we should agree with Yarkho is a separate question; what matters now is that this excerpt compels a conclusion somewhat similar to Shklovsky's assertion that *King Lear*'s being a tragedy "is the least significant thing about it" (Shklovsky 1990, p. 109). Likewise, it could be said that gaiety and laughter are only typical of comedy but do not constitute its distinctive feature. Without delving into Yarkho's study (which would require a discussion distant from that of the *Opoyaz* theory), suffice it to say that his conclusion is that the difference between comedy and tragedy hinges on such formal features as the vivacity of action (the personages' dialogues, their exits and entrances), which features are variable in number but retain the kind of proportion that, as a rule, makes comedies livelier. All said does not exclude the feeling of the tragic, and neither does it that of the comic, but, according to Yarkho, this feeling is not permanent but changes over time, whereas the formal distinction he makes can be tracked across different epochs.

One could object to it on the grounds that Yarkho's method is akin to studying smoke by observing fires: fire is conducive and even essential to smoke, as is the vivacity of action to comedy (though there are examples to the contrary, as in David Lynch's manifestly static comic scenes in *Twin Peaks*); but we will not know the chemical composition of smoke unless we analyze it directly—and the same could be said about the comic. Unlike Yarkho, the *Opoyazians* do not try to study a phenomenon by its features (the comic, by "semantic contradiction"); they say that the features *are* the phenomenon: the comic is a case of "semantic contradiction"; meanwhile, its comicalness is attendant; it is no more essential to that which we call the comic than the vernacular, Romance, origins are to *le roman*, the novel.

The fact that such different Formalists as the *Opoyazians* and Yarkho overlapped in their understanding of humor testifies to a common Formalist stance, more outwardly daring in the case of Shklovsky and his allies and more academically corroborated and reserved in Yarkho's. Needless to say, this stance on humor may be regarded as a violation of humor's meaning. Yet the history of the term "humor" does allow one to insist on a purely constructive, non-comic, understanding of it based on ancient medicine, in which humors referred to the four bodily fluids. With time, the term evolved to mean something comic as when one is whimsical, being unable to keep his humors in balance—the condition of physical and mental health.¹⁷ Such whimsicality may, of course, be *considered* as comic, but it may also be expressed as a chart, so to speak.

¹⁶ This famous work of Gogol's begins as a comedy about a provincial town visited by a rake whom local authorities mistake for an inspector general (awaited at any minute to arrive) and who later passes himself off as the said inspector. The last scene is in stark contrast with the rest of the play: the characters in it freeze and lapse into silence, in awe at the news of the real inspector general's arrival. Gogol wanted this scene to be reminiscent of the moment of truth during the last, fateful, day of Pompeii (as painted by Karl Bryullov).

¹⁷ Cf. Scott-Warren (2003, pp. 74–75):

That is exactly what we find in the 1927 article of Evgeniya Zhurbina, a student of *Opoyaz* Formalists. Her article is devoted to the genre of the feuilleton, extremely popular at the time. Zhurbina explains the deliberately disjointed composition of the often not-so-witty Soviet feuilletons (with a riddling title, with sudden switching from one topic to another) as a remnant of the play of wit, historically characteristic of this genre. Zhurbina's article (focused, organized as a typical academic text) is different from those written by the three *Opoyazians*, but the same logic underlies it. The article suggests that wit (which, it may be added, had not always been interpreted as comic)¹⁸ only served as a motivation for the emergence of the construction used in the Soviet feuilleton.

The objections to the *Opoyaz* take on humor are easy to predict; they will be the same as those already considered in the first part of this article (in the sections devoted to *zaum'* and teleological motivation). It is possible to rebuke Shklovsky and his allies for a degree of equivocation in their treatment of humor, which they sometimes use in the colloquial, psychological, sense and in other cases, in that of a construction.¹⁹ This is characteristic of the *Opoyaz* Formalists, who constantly play with commonsensical terms, first seemingly assuming them and then turning them inside out. Adversaries will see it as methodological sloppiness and adherents, as a paradox, a summersault typical of essayistic writing and thinking, to which the *Opoyazians'* texts doubtless belong. The truth of the matter, meanwhile, is that the *Opoyaz* interpretation of humor qua construction cannot be completely refuted because the jokes explored by Shklovsky or the parodies analyzed by Tynianov are indeed constructed in a certain way. The conclusions the *Opoyazians* draw from these observations can be disputed, of course, but they cannot be rebutted either because these conclusions sprout from the *Opoyaz* Formalists' *Weltanschauung*, which, in turn, comes from their implicit values. Therefore, a question to ask at this point is not whether the *Opoyaz* Formalists were correct. The question is whether humor was of independent value to them or

At the end of the sixteenth century, dramatists discovered [. . .] the comedy of humors. The Galenic medical theory of the four humors, bodily substances that in their various combinations determined personality, remained extremely influential. Conscripted for the purposes of creating theatrical characters, Galenism issued in the "humorist," the individual marked out by a single trait or habit of speech. Johnson defines humor as "when some one peculiar quality / Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw / All his affects, his spirits, and his powers, / In their confluents, all to runne one way. . ."

¹⁸ Cf. the old meaning of the word "wit" in English, with the same sense as "to know"; also cf. such synonyms of wit as "sharpness" and "perspicuity." Finally, in one of the greatest treatises on wit, Baltasar Gracián's 1648 *Agudeza y arte de ingenio*, not all kinds of wit are described as humorous. Thus, Gracián recounts how "[t]he Roman Fabius was drinking a glass of milk one day when a hair that had fallen into it stuck in his throat, and he was choked to death" (Chambers 1962, p. 505). The milk given to him by the mother had her hair. There is nothing witty about it, but here is what the imagination of the poet Pablo de Rojas, whom Gracián calls ingenious, made out of it: "Our life! O fragile happiness! Life's fête / Brings death. Why do we live when life depends / Upon a hair that's fallen in the milk?" (qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 506). This is witty but not necessarily comic.

¹⁹ Already at this point, Shklovsky could be accused of the same logical fallacy that Bakhtin imputed to the Formalists in general, namely, *quaternio terminorum*, or the fallacy of four terms, which goes against the rule of only three terms requisite for a categorical syllogism. In Shklovsky's case, the problem is that we have two kinds of humor discussed: (1) exterior, psychological, humor; (2) humor qua construction, hence not necessarily humorous, in the first sense. Cf. Bakhtin 1990 (p. 268):

The failure to distinguish the three moments [. . .] (a) the aesthetic object, (b) the extra-aesthetic, material givenness of a work, (c) the teleologically understood composition of a given material—introduces into the work done by material aesthetics [i.e., *Opoyaz* Formalism] [. . .] a great deal of ambiguity and confusion. It leads to a constant *quaternio terminorum* in its conclusions: what one has in view is sometimes the aesthetic object, sometimes the external work, and sometimes the composition.

merely a handy illustration. Simply put, did they care about humor, and should we care about their thoughts concerning it?

My answer is that humor was valuable to them, but not as an object or an outcome; it was of value to the *Opoyazians* as a behavioral attitude. The *Opoyazians* wanted to approach the (meaning of the) material in literature as humorously as literature itself approached it in their eyes.²⁰ However, approaching humor with humor, whose main weapon, one could argue, is that of the deconstruction (or reduction) of its object, was akin to firing fire with fire.

Thus, it has been shown that after having associated literary evolution with parody, the *Opoyazians* reconsidered the latter as not necessarily humorous, from the standpoint of literary evolution. The same was true of *ostranenie*. It has already been said that for the *Opoyazians* qualitatively new works, charged with the energy of *ostranenie*, are often humorous: they are so unusual that one will likely laugh at them, similar to a person who, having never seen ballet, laughs at the movements of ballerinas. But, as Aage A. Hansen-Löve demonstrates, this leads not to the ultimate celebration of humor but to the opposite result. He writes that, in compliance with the principle of *ostranenie*, the Formalists "aesthetiz[ed]" "the devices usually [. . .] employed as comic ones"; he mentions as an example "the joke, the funny story, satire," and other comic forms that previously "were [. . .] exhausted by the gaiety and laughter they evoked"; but from the *Opoyaz* standpoint, he says, these lose "the incipient communicative function" and now "serve [. . .] the exclusively artistic and immanent ends, so that the 'comic coloring' of these devices [. . .] is canceled out" (Hansen-Löve 2001, p. 192, emphasis added).

In fact, literature's merry play, of which the *Opoyazians* wrote, is the less humorous the more dominant it becomes. Two contemporaries of the *Opoyazians* described this phenomenon. Andrei Bely wrote about it with regard to Gogol, when in his very long and detailed book he decided not to discuss Gogol's humor separately. Andrei Bely discusses Gogol's craft instead. Yet this is not done to slight humor in Gogol; on the contrary, Andrei Bely writes: "[I]t can be said about Gogol's humor: it is all; it is everywhere; therefore, is it humor after all?" (Bely 1934, p. 236) Another example is from José Ortega y Gasset's 1925 essay (Ortega y Gasset 1968, p. 47, emphasis added):

[T]he modern inspiration—and this is a strange fact indeed—is invariably waggish [*la nueva inspiración es siempre, indefectiblemente, cómica*]. The waggery [*la comicidad*] may be more or less refined, it may run the whole gamut from open clownery to a slight ironical twinkle, but it is always there. *And it is not that the content of the work is comical—that would mean a relapse into a mode or species of the "human" style—but that, whatever the content, the art itself is jesting.*

The "inhumanity" that Ortega writes about resonates with a quotation from Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, which served as an epigraph to this article. "[L]aughter without an object," laughter, or humor, as an attitude, is as ethereal and elusive as light; from a message, it turns into a medium, and is no longer noticed by itself (Hesse 2002, p. 154).²¹

What the *Opoyazians* did was, in fact, cross the line beyond which humor lay and identify themselves with humor. They thereby violated the principle that Mikhail Bakhtin called *vnenakhodimost'* (translated as outsideness). In Bakhtin's theory, outsideness describes the relationship of the author to his hero and his work. The precondition of the hero and the work's fulfilment is the author's existence outside of his text, or his transgression to it. Bakhtin writes (Bakhtin 1990, p. 12):

²⁰ To read more on this personification of the system, in this case literature, in *Opoyaz* theory, cf. Lvoff (2015, pp. 39–42).

²¹ Cf. McLuhan (who could justly be called one of the greatest formalists in history): "The instance of the electric light may prove illuminating [. . .] It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name" (McLuhan 2003, p. 19).

The author is the bearer and sustainer of the intently active unity of a consummated whole (the whole of a hero and the whole of a work) which is transgredient to each and every one of its particular moments or constituent features. [. . .] The author's consciousness [. . .] encompasses and *consummates* the consciousness of a hero by supplying those moments which are in principle transgredient to the hero's consciousness and which, if rendered immanent, would falsify this consciousness.

The *Opoyazians* write about humor while also identifying with it and writing on its behalf; this annuls transgredience, outsidersness; when humor is not only the "hero" but also the "author," who interferes with the hero's autonomy, what happens is that "[a]ll of the moments that actively consummate the hero render the hero passive, the way a part is passive in relation to the whole which encompasses and consummates it" (*ibid.*, p. 14). The violation of *vnenakhodimost'*, which led to firing fire with fire as far as the *Opoyazians'* theory of humor is concerned, could be regarded as their fundamental failure, a monument to their scientific error.²² However, it may equally be considered one of their greatest discoveries, one of their greatest lessons, this particular one yet to be learned.

The *Opoyazians* let humor loose; they let it do everything it was wont to: strip and displace, make light of, reverse and subvert. In the *Opoyaz* hands, humor first defeated everything serious in literature, and literature as such became humorous, but then, irreverent and unrestrained, humor turned on itself. The *Opoyaz* Formalists released the destructive potential of humor, so that their ratiocination resulted in the destruction of humor by humor, and that, no matter whether one welcomes it, was not humorless. The *Opoyazians* showed us how humor sees itself, how art sees itself, how the ever-becoming system (form) sees itself. The *Opoyazians* let art outwit them and then ventriloquized its message of constant alienation of everything we humans create.

However, it would be unjust to accuse the *Opoyaz* Formalists of unanimously siding with alienation and slighting the writer, nay, the person. As writers themselves, they insisted on alienation not to celebrate but to shun it. Thus, later Shklovsky wrote that "the non-inclusion of meaning into literature is cowardice"—the words uttered by someone who knew all too well how easily the writer is robbed of his meaning (Shklovsky 1983, p. 74). Shklovsky and his allies admired the merry playfulness of art, but they also understood that mortal ones cannot outplay art by turning into simple-minded relativists who have no personal values. Furthermore, the lives of Shklovsky, Tynianov, and Eikhenbaum show that this faith in the merry nature of art was dearly paid for. Suffice it to cite the following autobiographical timeline from Eikhenbaum's 1929 book *My Chronicle* (Eikhenbaum 2001, p. 48):

The war (one month prior to it—mother's death).
 The revolution (one month prior to it—father's death).
 The October coup.
 Hunger, the cold, son's death. [. . .] Blok's death, the death of Gumilev.
 Viktor Shklovsky, who stopped me walking down the street; Yuri Tynianov, whom I noticed already at the Pushkin Seminar.
 The "Opoyaz."
 All these were historical chance and unexpectedness.
 This was history playing its muscles [*myshechnye dvizheniia istorii*].

No matter how terrifying the price, the *Opoyaz* Formalists did not turn to art to seek banal, psychologist, causation in it. Art with its own meaning—making this world ever strange, again and again, at the cost of our suffering, at the cost of taking away our most cherished expressions committed to it—art was worth it.

²² Cf. Sheldon's paper (Sheldon 1975) that analyzes Shklovsky's article "A Monument to Scientific Error," which, as Sheldon shows, was Shklovsky's ostensible, forced, denunciation of *Opoyaz* ideas.

Appendix

The example with music raises numerous questions, answers to which can only be outlined here. I am most thankful for the consultation of Jeffrey L. Prater, composer and Professor Emeritus in the Department of Music at Iowa State University.

First of all, it is necessary to say that Shklovsky did not write much about music. He did not play it either, unlike Eikhenbaum, who had some education in the field. There are many musical metaphors in Eikhenbaum, but he does not theorize about music. Tynianov, as Shklovsky, was not very keen on music. Pointing this out is of import because literature and cinema, of which Shklovsky wrote profusely, he was involved in as a practitioner, as was Tynianov. This fact does not automatically dismiss Shklovsky's arguments but is a reminder that he was less invested in music; after all, that which he wrote of music was largely an analogy.

As for Shklovsky's particular example, the unavoidable question is about the boundaries of the specifically musical. Does a melody played in major instead of the original minor remain itself, or no longer? One may want to compare the famous French folk tune *Frère Jacques* (a major-mode canon) with its slightly decorated minor-mode version in the first movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 1. Without answering this question here, it may be added that using the major or the minor key presupposes a certain reaction in the majority of the melody's recipients, who *listen* to this melody, whereas the literary text is usually read to oneself, and the autonomy of an average reader is greater than that of an average music lover. Of course, a musician can perceive the score visually, and the question, then, is whether he or she will still associate sadness with the minor and gaiety with the major key. This said, such a distinction between the two can be primitive—thus, Klezmer music written in minor tends to sound merry. Another example, this time from classical music, is J. S. Bach's *Little Fugue in G Minor*. In fact, the distinction between major as merry and minor as sad took root after the Baroque and flourished already during the Romantic period. Finally, one would commit an injustice by reducing music to the gay or the sad, when there are so many other feelings in between. Besides, one will have to distinguish the emotions of the soul in music from these of the spirit (to use Eikhenbaum's terminology); then the constructive sadness of a melody may be different from that perceived by a listener, but one, of course, could rightly ask why call it sadness in the first place.

What Shklovsky says about the pattern (of a melody) remaining itself no matter the key is a problem not only of abstract theory but also of the kind of theory that accounts for historical change. Particular forms have a tradition (and perhaps a biological suggestiveness, but that is already a separate question) of being perceived in a certain way, since different keys (not only major and minor but also keys based on particular central notes) were considered to possess distinct affections during the Baroque era, and later. In fact, the *Opoyazians* acknowledged and studied this phenomenon as far as literature was concerned (consider the *Opoyaz* notion of orientation [*ustanovka*]).²³ It was at the same time with the *Opoyazians* that Bakhtin developed this problem with regard to genre theory, hence his notion of genre memory.

As far as Shklovsky's particular example is concerned, it could be said that, albeit there may be nothing essentially sad or merry in a melody, the meaning a particular key (or a particular alteration of tones) developed in a particular community may signal one emotion or another. (After all, however possessed by the constructively essential and objective we may be, is it possible to do without this signaling, which presupposes a degree of conventionality and consensus? Otherwise, no sort of reaction, purely intellectual, privately emotional, or spiritually emotional, would be possible.) It should be remembered that Brik studied the

²³ Cf. fn. 33 in the first part of this article.

meaning of meter in poetry, his studies reflected in the notion of a meter's semantic halo [*semanticheskii oreol metra*], later developed by Mikhail Gasparov and Kiril Taranovsky.²⁴ What this study showed was that trochaic pentameter, for example, is associated with the theme of solitude and journey in the Russian tradition. Yet the *Opoyaz* take on this would be that such "sadness" or "gaiety" are only masks but not the essence of the melody. The essence is that of the formal cause, in which the personal aspect (usually implied when one mentions sadness or gaiety) is the subservient one.

As far as the meaning of form is at issue, that again is the major difference between the *Opoyazians* and Bakhtin, even though their genre theories have important overlaps. The difference is eloquently summarized by Igor Shaitanov: "As always in his argument with the Formalists, Bakhtin is against substituting the contents [*soderzhatel'nost'*] of the sound, the device, and even the constructive factor, for the meaning of the formed aesthetic event [*sobytie*] [between the creator and the perceiver], which took place thanks to it" (Shaitanov 2010, p. 96.)

A knowledgeable but insensitive critic may also associate Shklovsky's stance with that of Joseph Schillinger, which is especially tempting given some resemblance of their metaphors (Schillinger 1948, p. 5):

Music [. . .] is man-made illusion of actuality, and so is every art. [. . .] Music makes one believe it is alive because it moves and acts like living matter. [. . .] The common belief that "music is emotional" has to be repudiated as a primeval animism, which still survives in the confused psyche of our contemporaries. This erroneous conception can be easily justified as "naive realism." Music appears emotional because it moves—since everything that moves associates itself with life and living. Actually, music is no more emotional than an automobile, locomotive or an airplane, which also move. Music is no more emotional than the Disney characters that make us laugh, but whose actual form of existence is not organic, but mechanical (a strip of pictures drawn on celluloid and projected on a screen).

However, this is an example of that which Shklovsky called "the dissimilarity of the similar" (the subtitle of his book *Bowstring*—cf. Shklovsky 1970). The difference is that Shklovsky believed that mechanical movement is opposed to art, in which duration reigns—he says the latter openly drawing on Bergson (cf. Shklovsky 1923). Moreover, Schillinger believed that, having construed form, it is possible to reproduce it, creating different works of art scientifically. The *Opoyazians* were averse to such logic. Form is fundamentally unpredictable according to them. Cf., e.g., Shklovsky's discussion of rhythm in "Art as Device" or Tynianov's "The Literary Today" (in Tynianov 1977).

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²⁴ Cf. Gasparov (1999).

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