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IN SEARCH OF THE POETIC FUNCTION. AMERICAN ‘LANGUAGE POETRY’ REVISITS RUSSIAN FORMALISM

The paper explores Russian Formalism’s impact on literary theories and practices of the Language school in American poetry. Poets of this school were interested in the Formalists mainly due to their connections with the poetry of the Russian Futurism. Yet the theoretical thought of the Formal School was one of the main inspirations for “Language poets”, in advocating for a new language-centered material poetics. Viktor Shklovsky’s theory of *ostranenie* and his own techniques in literary writing had a direct influence on LanPo’s sense of literary style and strategies (in the writings of Lyn Hejinian, Barrett Watten, Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein, and some others). The value of the Formalists was in their social orientation: the principles of MLK and OPOYAZ were reinvented in the new conditions of American alternative poetics of the 1970–1980s. The paper also accounts for the resonances of Russian Futurism in neo-avant-garde American poetry, as well as for correspondences between Language Poetry and Russian postmodernism (Conceptualism and Metarealism).

Keywords: Russian Formalism, American poetry, Language poets, Conceptualism, Metarealism.

*In memory of Lyn Hejinian
and Marjorie Perloff*

Few paths have crossed in the history of Russian and American avant-garde poetry. Vladimir Mayakovsky’s visit to America in 1925 seems to have had no direct impact on the American poetic milieu. During his visit to Soviet Russia in 1931, Edward Estlin Cummings never got to meet his Soviet colleagues in ‘leftist’ poetry: Mayakovsky, Yesenin and Khlebnikov had already died by that time; David Burliuk had moved to the American continent (without ever establishing contacts with contemporary poets there); Boris Pasternak, Alexei Kruchenykh, Vassily Kamensky and other avant-garde writers had retreated to more moderate poetics due to the oppression imposed by official aesthetics.

Only after World War II did the Russian poetic avant-garde — mainly represented by Mayakovsky's legacy — find footing in the active field of innovative American poetics, as is most evident in the work of Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg. The Beatniks made the first sporadic but bold attempts to establish personal ties between American and Russian alternative poetry. The visits of Allen Ginsberg to the USSR and of Evgeny Yevtushenko and Andrey Voznesensky to the United States in the 1960s and 1970s allowed the new poetic voices of the two major literary cultures to be introduced to each other in person¹.

Intense creative ties between Russian and American innovative poetics began to take shape only in the 1970–1980s, when a number of American poets visited the Soviet Union first unofficially and then officially. Most of them were the poets of the LANGUAGE movement. Language as such, as well as the Futurists' 'word as such', united two national traditions of poetic writing in a single space of creative exchange. The Formal School as a theoretical wing of the Russian Avant-Garde proved a crucial significance in this exchange. The influence of Russian Formalism on world culture is enormous and no longer needs justification. This influence is well reflected and described in the field of literary and cultural theory, philosophy, linguistics, and other humanities. In this paper, I would like to address the lesser-known resonances of the Formal method, namely, in the literary practices of American 'Language Poetry'.

Resurrection of the device: Language Poetry performs Russian Formalism

Language Poetry, otherwise referred to as Language Writing, Language School, or 'language-centered poetry', is a neo-avant-garde poetic movement that emerged in the early 1970s in the United States as a countercultural opposition to mainstream American poetry. It united not one, but a number of communities of poets in different parts of the United States. With five decades of practice, it remains one of the largest poetic movements to this day. Many of its participants continue to be active today. Some critics call 'language poetry' not even a group or movement, but a 'tendency' in American and global avant-garde literature, a tendency to highlight the linguistic 'madness' of the text, the materiality of signifieds in poetry. As we will see in further analysis, the ideas of Russian Formalism, mainly of Viktor Shklovsky, played a key role in the theory and practice of Language Poetry.

For all the decentralisation of the Language movement, historically and geographically, the school originally had two main centers — San Francisco and New York. In 1971, two poets from the West Coast, Robert Grenier and Barrett Watten, began publishing an independent poetry magazine in Iowa City under the deictic title *This*. The term *language-centered poetry* was first used in 1973

¹ On Russian-American and American-Russian transfers and typological affinities in the field of language-oriented poetics of the 20th century see Feshchenko (2023b).

by the California-based poet Ron Silliman, who in 1970 had started publishing the language-oriented poetic bulletin *Tottel's*. In 1975, Silliman published a selection of poems by nine authors in the magazine *Alcheringa*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg, in a first attempt to present the Language poets as a circle.

On the East coast, starting in the late 1970s, Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein edited a newsletter named after the movement: $L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E$. As in the 1920s and 30s, experimental literature in the 1970s was mainly printed in small magazines, drawing upon the counter-cultural strategies of its precursors. Among the most active journals and publishers associated with the Language movement were Kit Robinson's *Streets and Roads*, Clark Coolidge's and Michael Palmer's *Joglars*, James Sherry's *ROOF*, Alan Davies' *A Hundred Posters*, Bob Perelman's *Hills*, Barrett Watten's and Lyn Hejinian's *Poetics Journal*, and Lyn Hejinian's *Tuumba Press*. At the same time, the circle of authors associated with this movement was rapidly expanding. Neither the poets themselves nor scholars of their work have compiled an exhaustive list of participants. Close to a hundred different authors are more or less consistently included in this movement. Charles Bernstein (2012) prefers to talk about the "expanded field of language writing", which also includes similar literary phenomena from around the world.

Language writing is, indeed, a more accurate term for these literary practices. They are not limited to poetry, although poetic discourse is paramount. The boundaries between poetry and prose, free and 'non-free' verse, essay and treatise, theory and practice are eliminated here. Many of these texts are written and read at the same time as utterances and meta-utterances, both as poems and critical essays. The influence of French Post-Structuralist theory is embodied in poetic form: a critical theory of discourse is created by poetic discourse. The political meaning of such writing, within the context of Vietnam-era protest culture in the United States, is in criticizing the dominant discourses, inverting everyday speech into a unique poetic language. The Russian poet Alexei Parshchikov, who was influenced by Language writing, conveyed its essence very aptly: "Language was inherent to natural phenomena, scientific models, our body, and the forms of ideas that lived objectively in a special 'reserve', as in Karl Popper's World 3. American poets were interested in language as an extension of the body, intellect, and new technologies. Michael Palmer spoke of poetry 'marked by the quality of resistance and the necessary complexity, with the obligatory breakthrough and rejection, as well as exploratory forms'" (cit. in Bernstein 2020: 399)². Research and academic teaching are also an important part of the public image of Language writers. Research, of course, also includes inquiry. One of the most important books to come out of the Language school is *The Language of Inquiry* (2000) by Lyn Hejinian, in which she posits that "poetic language is the language of inquiry".

² Palmer and Parshchikov have translated each other's poems between English and Russian.

In her essay “Barbarism”, a review of the historical context of the Language school, Hejinian points to some of the common features shared by its authors, such as the intersection of the aesthetic and ethical, the isomorphism of aesthetic and social endeavours, new ways of thinking, and new relationships between the components of thought and writing (Hejinian 2000: 323):

- a poem is not an isolated autonomous rarified aesthetic object
- a person (the poet) has no irreducible, ahistorical, unmediated, singular, kernel identity
- language is a preeminently social medium
- the structures of language are social structures in which meanings and intentions are already in place
- institutionalised stupidity and entrenched hypocrisy are monstrous and should be attacked
- racism, sexism, and classism are repulsive
- prose is not necessarily not poetry
- theory and practice are not antithetical
- it is not surrealism to compare apples to oranges
- intelligence is romantic.

It would seem from this list of principles that such activities are not consistent with the Formalist pathos of a work of literature as an autonomous object to be analyzed and with Formalism’s distinct treatment of prose and poetry as two separate ‘languages’ (cf. Shklovsky’s ‘theory of prose’ and OPOYAZ’ ‘studies in poetic language’). Yet, the literary practices of Russian Formalists, both artistic and theoretical, proved quite instrumental for LanPo’s own writing policies.

By the time the Language movement emerged, Russian Formalism was already known in the Anglophone world from the influential books by Victor Erlich (1955) and Wellek and Warren (1949)³, and by the 1970s — from important publications such as Lemon and Reis (1965); Bann and Bowlt (1973); and Jameson (1972). Roman Jakobson who worked in the USA was a living representative of the Formal School and certainly had a direct impact on Russian Formalism’s reception in the West. The school of New Criticism which called itself the ‘New Formalism’ was raised on these ideas. However, in 1972, Fredric Jameson, in his book *The Prison House of Language*, expressed an “astonishment” that “in the fifteen years since the publication of Victor Erlich’s definitive English-language survey of Formalism, this movement has had so little impact on American critical practice” (1972: 85). The impact followed soon, when the Language poets began their critical and poetic activities in the early 1970s⁴.

³ On the reception of Russian Formalism in Erlich’s book and other Slavic studies see Merrill (2023) and Tripiccone (2023).

⁴ Jameson grasped this preoccupation with *language as such* in the 1960–70s intellectual landscape in the West: “Language as a model! To rethink everything through once again in terms

Russian Formalism was of interest to American neo-avant-garde poets also due to its close connections with the poetry of the avant-garde, primarily of Russian Futurism⁵. And if the figure of Mayakovsky was already significant for the previous generation of American counter-culture (for the Beatniks, Frank O'Hara and the New York School of poets), for the Language poets the Formalist theoretical thought turned out to be more relevant. The Formalist 'device' was to be 'resurrected' — just as the 'resurrected word' and the 'resurrected things' in Shklovsky's renowned manifest — in a new era and in a new cultural formation.

Lyn Hejinian noted that reading Russian Futurists and Formalists was perhaps the main factor in the first experiments of Language Writing: "By that time several of Shklovsky's books had been translated, and Victor Erlich's big book called *Russian Formalism* had been published, which we all read and talked about and which had an enormous impact. Erlich's book is still, I think, the most thorough and provocative of the many works about the Russian Formalist movement, but Shklovsky had the direct influence on our sense of literary style and strategies. Barrett's early work *Plasma/Paralleles/"X"* was very much influenced by Shklovsky" (Hejinian 1995). Barrett Watten's text referred to by Hejinian is a good illustration of hybrid writing where poetry, prose, and critical theory come together, a principle adopted from the early Shklovsky (alongside other important influences, such as Gertrude Stein and Objectivism) (Watten 1979: 7–8):

A paradox is eaten by the space around it.

I'll repeat what I said.

To make a city into a season is to wear sunglasses inside a volcano.

He never forgets his dreams.

The effect of the lack of effect.

The hand tells the eye what to see.

I repress other useless attachments. Chances of survival are one out of ten.

I see a tortoise drag a severed head to the radiator.

They lost their sense of proportion. Nothing is the right size.

of linguistics! What is surprising, it would seem, is only that no one ever thought of doing so before; for of all the elements of consciousness and of social life, language would appear to enjoy some incomparable onto logical priority, of a type yet to be determined" (Idem: vii). The American critic would later, in his book *Postmodernism*, target Bob Perelman's poem "China" as an exemplary postmodernist text from Language Writing.

⁵ The early Russian Futurists' idea of a 'poetic language' helped usher in the language bias in 1960–70s American writing. A major conceptual precursor to Language Writing was the work of Jack Spicer, a poet of the San Francisco Renaissance. In 1965, he published the poetry collection *Language*, parts of which were named after linguistic disciplines: morphemics, phonetics, semantics, etc. A famous poem from this collection, "Thing Language", issues a challenge to the linguisticity of poetry, taking up a problematics that would later permeate Language Poetry.

He walks in the door and sits down.

The road turns into a beautiful country drive. The voice isn't saying something, but turning into things.

Irregular movements spread out the matter at hand.

My work then is done.

The succession of short sentences separated by empty lines is a device clearly borrowed from Shklovsky's prose. Watten himself dwells upon the emergence of his interest in the Formal method in an afterword to his bilingual Anglo-Russophone book: "В семидесятые, когда в России царила эпоха застоя, начали пробуждаться отзвуки русского авангарда. Первым моим знакомством с ним был перевод Ричардом Шелдоном книги Виктора Шкловского «О Маяковском», который мне порекомендовал поэт Кеннет Ирби (символист и, отметим, близкий последователь Роберта Данкена)" (Watten 2024: 420). Shklovsky's *On Maykovsky* was originally published in 1940 and translated into English as *Mayakovsky and His Circle* (1972).

Since the 1970s, Barrett Watten appeared a lot on radio and in print, where he talked about the role of the Formal School for the new American poetic movement. In his magazine *Poetics*, he published a translation of Shklovsky's article about Rozanov, and in *Hills* magazine — an essay "Russian Formalism and Our Days" (1980)⁶. He reactualized the concepts of "laying bare the device" and "literariness" and the Formalists' opposition the 'subjective-aesthetic approach' in literature was taken into account, with reference to Boris Eikhenbaum. The value of the Formalists, for Watten, is in their social practice; he proposes to reinvent the principles of MLK and OPOYAZ in the new conditions of American alternative poetics. In the same essay, Watten demonstrated how the Formal method worked in textual cases of Khlebnikov's and Mayakovsky's poetry, as well as in narrative cases of Shklovsky's prose ("A Sentimental Journey"). What followed, in the spirit of the protocols of Formalist circles, was a collective discussion of the texts of the Language poets themselves from the position of the Formalist principles of *ostranenie*, *deavtomatizatsija* and *sdvig*. Thus, Ron Silliman's text "Ketjak" was analyzed against the backdrop of Shklovsky's "Third Factory", in which each subsequent sentence acts as particular device to lay bare. The Formalists' principle of identity between the device and its effect was at work again in the new language-centered literature.

Inspired by the Formal method, Language poets consider their texts to be part of social communication through language experimentation. Ron Silliman's manifesto-like essay "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World" criticizes the transparency effect of conventional literature, where language is used instrumentally. The Formalists' opponents in early Soviet Russia, such as Valen-

⁶ Kit Robinson's chapbook *Tribute to Nervous* (1980) included the poems "Zoo" and "Not About" with explicit references to Shklovsky's *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love*.

tin Voloshinov and Mikhail Bakhtin⁷, are referred to in critiques of discourses as social formations. With reference to Voloshinov's Marxist philosophy of language, Silliman calls poetry a "philosophy of practice in language" that requires "(1) recognition of the historic nature and structure of referentiality, (2) placing the issue of language, the repressed element, at the center of the program, and (3) placing the program into the context of conscious class struggle" (1984: 131). In his book of essays *The New Sentence* (1987), Silliman connects literary realism with bourgeois capitalism and demonstrates how this capitalism can be eradicated by the theory and practice of the 'New Sentence'. The 'New Sentence' as a unit of language writing was supposed to minimize the syllogistic effect expected in a work of prose through transformations in the structure, length, and position of the sentence or utterance within a text, thus reinforcing its polysemy. This is how Silliman's own poems are arranged, in particular *The Chinese Notebook*, which is built on the model of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* with its numbered sequences of aphorisms (Silliman 2007: 149):

5. Language is, first of all, a political question.

6. I wrote this sentence with a ballpoint pen. If I had used another would it have been a different sentence?

7. This is not philosophy, it's poetry. And if I say so, then it becomes painting, music or sculpture, judged as such. If there are variables to consider, they are at least partly economic — the question of distribution, etc. Also differing critical traditions. Could this be good Poetry, yet bad music? But yet I do not believe I would, except in jest, posit this as dance or urban planning.

8. This is not speech. I wrote it.

Silliman's hundred-page poem "Ketjak" is a series of expanding paragraphs in which sentences are repeated from paragraph to paragraph in the same order, but are augmented each time with new interpolations, increasingly recontextualizing their meanings (Silliman 2007: 3):

Revolving door.

Revolving door. A sequence of objects which to him appears to be a caravan of fellaheen, a circus, begins a slow migration to the right vanishing point on the horizon line.

Revolving door. Fountains of the financial district. Houseboats beached at the point of low tide, only to float again when the sunset is reflected in the water. A sequence of objects which to him appears to be a caravan of fellaheen, a circus, camels pulling wagons of bear cages, tamed ostriches in toy hats, begins a slow migration to the right vanishing point on the horizon line.

Grammar in such texts acts as a substitute for metrics. It becomes prosody, i.e. the formal principle of commensurability of elements: "the torquing which

⁷ The Language poet Michael Davidson dedicated an essay (1989) to Bakhtin's theory of dialogue in discourse, applying it to poetic language.

is normally triggered by linebreaks, the function of which is to enhance ambiguity and polysemy, has moved directly into the grammar of the sentence. At one level, the completed sentence (i.e., not the completed thought, but the maximum level of grammatic / linguistic integration) has become equivalent to a line, a condition not previously imposed on sentences” (Silliman 1987: 90). This principle, in particular, proves that the projection from the axis of selection to the axis of combination can be characteristic not only of poetry, as Roman Jakobson believed, but also of prose organized in this way.

Hejinian, too, implements the principles of the ‘New Sentence’ in her cross-genre writing. She notes that a sentence, unlike an ordinary utterance, has a spatial dimension, not only a temporal one. This spatiality is reflected in her texts: *In perception, since / I am thinking about a poem, I locate (just as I in fact experience) / the site of the perceiving in language itself. It is here that the interplay / between line and sentence is the most important* [Hejinian 2000: 61]. According to Hejinian, each sentence should be organized as a separate poem. For her, a sentence and a line are different cognitive tools of language. A sentence contains a complete thought, a section of cognition, while a line is a channel of cognition, and it can be as winding and branched as desired. From the ‘New Sentence’ she proceeds to what she calls the ‘New Paragraph’, associating this literary practice with Formalists’ own artistic devices: “And if the “new sentence” owes something to Viktor Shklovsky, the “new paragraph” is clearly derived from his writing” (Hejinian 2002:104)⁸. The technique of paragraph sequencing Shklovsky employed in *Third Factory* was exemplified in Bob Perelman’s *a.k.a.*, Carla Harryman’s miniature prose, as well as in Lyn’s own writings such as *My Life*.

Lyn Hejinian is probably the most familiar name in the Russian context among all representatives of Language Writing, mainly due to her long-term friendship and creative relationships with Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, whom she met in 1983, when she first arrived in Soviet Russia. By that time, she was already familiar with the works of Russian Formalists and Viktor Shklovsky’s theory of “defamiliarization”. She translated Shklovsky’s essay into English and wrote the preface to an English edition of *Third Factory*, in which she noted symptomatically that “the story of how the writings of the radical philologists, writers, and critics known as the Russian Formalists influenced (and at crucial points enlivened) the writings of the American avant-garde poets known as the Language writers remains largely untold” (Hejinian 2002: 101). Some glimpses from this story would be included in the book *Leningrad*, written in the early 1990s.

Acquaintance with Soviet Russia produced a “defamiliarizing” effect on Lyn, the “enchanted American”. As she described it later, “в результате — влекущее и сбивающее с толку, несколько даже наводящее ужас чувство, забирающее тебя с головой... Это не поддаётся никакому объяснению — так же, как не поддаётся объяснению большая часть того, что я испытала” (Hejinian 2023). Arkadii became Virgil for her in this ‘estranged’ country, a hos-

⁸ I thank Serguey Oushakine for making this edition available to me.

pitabile and consubstantial poet, best friend, interlocutor and guide in the Russian-American literary transit⁹.

Over the 1980s, Lyn Hejinian visited the USSR several times. During her fifth visit, in conversations with Dragomoshchenko and other poets, she came up with the idea of writing a ‘novel’ about her Russian travels and about the literary life of Leningrad. At the same time, she decided that the novel should be ‘short’ — not long, like most Russian novels. The result was a poetic experiment based on *Eugene Onegin*, 284 chapters of 14 stanzas each. “Pushkin remains himself, but what kind of self he is destined to remain” — in this line she expresses the original “Pushkin” idea, processed through the Formalist *ostranenie*. *OXOTA: A Short Russian Novel* was published in 1991 (reissued in 2019). According to Hejinian, the heroes themselves, the circle of the Leningrad artistic intelligentsia, took part in writing the novel. As the text itself states, the name was coined by Zinaida Dragomoshchenko, the poet’s wife, and was chosen not only because of the multiple Russian connotations of the concept of “oxota” (hunting) but also because the form of the word OXOTA could be read in both Cyrillic and Latin¹⁰.

In OXOTA, this strange, nonlinear poetic narrative, Hejinian seems to have summed up her ‘defamiliarizing’ acquaintance with Soviet reality and Russian literature. The text, as conceived by the author, is structured according to the model of *Eugene Onegin*, with short chapters in poetic form. It is structured the way Shklovsky described Pushkin’s *Onegin* and Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, as a game with a narrative (“игра с фабулой”) in which the artistic construction of the plot is more important than the story of Evgeny and Tatyana itself (Шкловский 1923: 211). At the same time, OXOTA reads as an encyclopedia of Russian life in the estranged perception of a foreigner, but also an encyclopedia of poetic techniques adopted by Hejinian from the Russian Formalists. One of the chapters contains an imaginary dialogue between Shklovsky and Tynyanov about generations (Hejinian 2019: 81):

Now the next generation is suffering, Tynyanov said to Shklovsky—
 we turned out to be poor nourishment and they are bad eaters
 Each suffering adds to the unrecognizable
 The time has arrived
 Night, interrupted, follows another night
 Mayakovsky said that horses never commit suicide because they
 don’t know how to talk—they could never describe their
 suffering

The reference here is to Tynyanov-Shklovsky correspondence where they discuss the principles of literary evolution. In her essay “Language and Paradise” (included in Hejinian 2000) Hejinian directly addresses the Russian context

⁹ On these and other contacts between American ‘Language writers’ and Russian poetry see Feshchenko (2022; 2023a). For a detailed account of conceptual aspects of Dragomoshchenko-Hejinian relations, see Sandler (2005), Edmond (2006).

¹⁰ On the ‘Russianness’ of Hejinian’s OXOTA see Perloff (1992).

of the Formal method, citing the works of Osip Brik and Yury Tynyanov on poetic language. Herewith she substantiates her textual strategy which she calls delay of coherence, clearly drawing upon Shklovsky's idea of deautomatized perception of a work of art.

Defamiliarizing defamiliarization: from Conceptualism to Social Formalism

While American language-centered poets and theorists could easily and openly apply Russian Formalist concepts to the critique of culture, society and politics, Russian alternative poetry of the time existed in the underground. In terms of Russian counterparts to Language poetry, the first contemporaneous analogue that comes to mind is Moscow Conceptualism. Without explicitly proclaiming an orientation towards language, poets such as Andrei Monastyrski, Vsevolod Nekrasov and Lev Rubinstein¹¹ were, indeed, operating with language and discourse in ways similar to those of Language writing without any knowledge of what was happening in America at that time. The Conceptualists were in complicated relationships with the Russian Avant-Garde: while borrowing some formal techniques from it, they at the same time opposed its socio-political pathos. The same seems to hold true about Russian Conceptualism's attitudes towards the Formal School; we do not see any traces of its sympathetic reception in the works of Prigov, Kabakov, Sorokin, or Rubinshtein. Conceptualists' main objective was to deconstruct the Soviet official discourse, with no ambition to reactualize the Avant-Garde's social endeavours.

Marjorie Perloff (1993) has justly warned against certain oversimplifications when comparing Russian and American poetic cultures. Yet, what they definitely have in common is their orientation towards the early Russian avant-garde's critique of language as a medium of creativity. Albena Lutzkanova-Vasileva suggests that "a parallel plotting of American Language poetry and Russian Conceptualist verses on a single stylistic, poetical graph thus manifests points of peculiar convergence via the commonality of the two with the Futurist school" (2016: 127). The scholar rightly juxtaposes Russian Conceptualism and Language poetry on the ground of their shared semiotic principle of 'sloughing off' ('отслаивание'), that is "the process of peeling off, divesting one by one the rich semantic layers of reality, until the reader is confronted with the nothingness of pure silence, utterly unburdened by a pre-existing meaning" (Idem: 129). Charles Bernstein, in his recent talks, acknowledges the affinity of his linguistic practices with those used by Moscow Conceptualists, most notably by Rubinstein.

¹¹ A very close analogue to Lev Rubinstein's 'cards' was Robert Grenier's minimalist verse. A Language writer from the East Coast, Grenier created a special format of publishing poetry; his *Sentences* series (1978) consisted of five hundred large-format catalog cards, each containing a short poem.

Despite these apparent similarities and affinities between Language poetry and Russian Conceptualism, a mutual fascination arose between the Language poets and the Metarealist circle¹². In 1990, two groups of poets — Alexei Parshchikov, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Ivan Zhdanov, Ilya Kutik and Nadezhda Kondakova, on the Russian side, and Michael Palmer, Lyn Hejinian, Jean Day, Clark Coolidge, and Kit Robinson, on the American side — launched a collaborative project named *5 + 5*. The idea was to compile an anthology of mutual translations by the authors involved. The initial translations were published in the Swedish magazine *Artes*. The anthology, however, was never published.

Michael Palmer was, along with Lyn Hejinian, most actively involved in these American-Russian poetic transfers¹³. In an interview with Vladimir Aristov, a Russian Metarealist poet, Palmer noted (Aristov 2013: <http://>):

How can we summarise the foundations common to us? We were all devoted to exploratory poetics and — in many ways — poetry of critical negativity and cultural resistance. Apart from the awareness of the need for exploratory poetry for the survival and renewal of culture, there was not much in common in our actual practice — which reflected our deeply different circumstances. With Aygi, Parshchikov, Khlebnikov and others, I perceived the ancient-modern resonance, which was new to me and which helped me in a new and broader understanding of the time horizons of innovative poetry. These lessons have stayed with me and deeply influenced my work.

Palmer notes in the same interview that he first met Gennady Aygi¹⁴ in Paris in the late eighties and spent some time with him in San Francisco shortly before his death and adds that they shared an interest “in the poetic function — or functions — of silence” (Ibidem).

The poets of the Language movement got the chance to encounter the Russian Formalist school firsthand in 1989, when four of them (Barrett Watten, Michael Davidson, Lyn Hejinian and Ron Silliman) were invited to Leningrad. They were supposed to meet with the Russian Neo-Formalist scholar Lidiya Ginzburg, whose talk “The Historical Significance of OPOYAZ” was on the program of the conference they attended. The conference itself was dedicated to a key Formalist concept, as reflected in its title, “Poetic function: language, consciousness, society”. It was organized by Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, at that time the chairman of the ‘creative program’ at the Soviet Cultural Foundation, which was also called “Poetic Function”.

¹² Although references to Russian Formalism are scarce in Metarealists’ work, they surely shared the Formalists’ interest in the intrinsic properties of the poetic form.

¹³ In 1983, Palmer compiled a small but influential anthology, *Code of Signals*, which included both theory and poetry from authors experimenting with different modes of writing. The book opens with an epigraph about poetry as a ‘code of signals’ (‘сигнализация’) from Osip Mandelstam’s *Conversation about Dante*, a choice that is itself a signal of the reception of Russian poetics in the American context.

¹⁴ Palmer wrote a cycle of poems dedicated to his Russian friend Aygi, published in his book *Thread* (2011); they have recently been translated into Russian by the Aygi scholar Olga Sokolova.

By the late 1980s, some poets of the Language movement had already visited the USSR¹⁵, but this time the visit was part of a large international event. However, the main result of this conference was direct contact between representatives of the American Language school and representatives of the two leading schools of unofficial Russian poetry — Metarealism and Conceptualism. However, a much greater number of Metarealists attended, among them Dragomoshchenko himself, Alexei Parshchikov, Ivan Zhdanov, Vladimir Aristov, Viktor Krivulin, and Ilya Kutik. From the Conceptualist camp, only Dmitry Prigov was present. Lyn Hejinian believes that, because of their common formal features, the two movements — Language poetry and Russian Metarealism — differed only to the extent that the American language and Western capitalism differed from the Russian language and Soviet communism. The paradigm of Metarealism turned out to be closer to Language poetry due to “a fascination with the epistemological and perceptual nature of language-as-thinking, the belief that poetic language is a suitable tool for exploring the world, an interest in the linguistic layering of a landscape” (Hejinian 2013: 64). Deep layering of linguistic units are characteristic to both Metarealist poetry and Language writing.

What all three groups of poets (Language poets, Conceptualists and Metarealists) shared was an interest in the relationship between language, consciousness, and society, as suggested by the title of the conference. Roman Jakobson’s ‘poetic function of language’ related all of them to the legacy of the Russian avant-garde. But the problematic of the conference was more in line with the intellectual landscape of the 1980s. It is no coincidence that Dragomoshchenko decided to invite a number of prominent Soviet linguists to participate, such as Vyacheslav Ivanov, Maxim Shapir, Suren Zolyan, and some others. During these same years, the problem of consciousness came to the forefront of scientific study: in linguistics, cognitive science, conceptual analysis, linguistics of altered states of consciousness, and the theory of metaphor. The mutual interest between Conceptualist and Metarealist poets and contemporary linguistics was as topical as it was long overdue.

The conference itself was described in the book *Leningrad*, published in the US in the wake of the trip by the four Language poets in attendance. It contains many references to the legacy of Russian Formalism. The authors admit that Formalism was a ‘treasure’ for the theoretical aspect of the Language school. The Formal school is associated here with a uniquely Russian approach to the poem as an object. In the American tradition, Objectivism was just an episode in the work of a small group of poets (Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi and a few others), whereas Russian theory gave birth to a whole scientific school of objectivist analysis of artistic structure: “The unity of two projects — call them scientific and cultural — around the poetic adds up to a kind of myth

¹⁵ After visiting Russia in the 1980s, Clark Coolidge was working on a poem called “Russian Nights”. Based on his trips to Saint-Petersburg he has also written two books: *This Time We Are Both* (published by Ugly Duckling Presse in 2010) and *City in Regard* (unpublished).

of the object whose authority ultimately lies in a transcendent inherence” (Davidson et al. 1991: 37). What fascinates the American poets is the Formalists’ passion for scientism in the analysis of an artistic object as autonomous structure.

Barrett Watten often refers to Russian Formalism in his scholarly works, such as in Watten (2003). He projects the concept of literariness as ‘сделанность’ onto modern poetics not so much as an aesthetic principle, but as an ethical imperative: “Viktor Shklovsky’s notions of the ‘orchestration of the verbal material’, ‘defamiliarization’, and the ‘semantic shift’ have seemed to us thus not simply a question of art but one of ethics: the meaning of creative action in a context of some kind (literature, society) that cannot entirely be accounted for” (Davidson et al. 1991: 28)¹⁶. The Russian poets the Americans met in the late 1980s in the USSR seemed to defamiliarize their own tradition of defamiliarization. In late Soviet Leningrad, the Language poets perceived the city of OPOYAZ in its ‘formal contours’ as a lived rather than represented experience. OPOYAZ acted as a model of a utopian marriage of the American and late Soviet avant-gardes¹⁷.

When it comes to revisiting Russian Formalism in American innovative poetry, one cannot underestimate the importance of Roman Jakobson’s work in linguistics for Barrett Watten, Rosmarie Waldrop, Charles Bernstein and other Language poets in the 1970s — not just because of its genetic connection to the Formalist school, which was extremely important for them, but also in its updated version, expressed in the article “Linguistics and Poetics” (1960). Charles Bernstein noted that, among linguists, Jakobson had the most pronounced influence on him with his concept of poetic language as “verbal language that foregrounds its material (acoustic and syntactic) features, providing an understanding of poetry as less about communicating a message than an engagement with the medium of verbal language itself” (2016: 73). The reference here is to Jakobson’s conception of language functions laid out in “Linguistics and Poetics”. The title of Barrett Watten’s book of criticism, *Questions of Poetics* (2016), is characteristically a borrowing from Jakobson; namely, from his French-language monograph *Questions de poétique*.

In the “Linguistics and Poetics” article, one of Jakobson’s concerns was how the poetic function of language differs from its metalingual function (1960: [http](http://)):

It may be objected that metalanguage also makes a sequential use of equivalent units when combining synonymic expressions into an equational sentence: A = A (‘Mare is the female of the horse’). Poetry and metalanguage, however, are in diametrical opposition to each other: in metalanguage the sequence is used to build an equation, whereas in poetry the equation is used to build a sequence.

In poetic texts from the Language school, and especially in Bernstein’s poetry, poetic and metapoetic functions are often combined within the frame-

¹⁶ The terms ‘defamiliarization’ and ‘orchestration of the verbal material’ are taken from Shklovsky’s “Art as Device”; the term ‘semantic shift’ from his *Theory of Prose*.

¹⁷ Jacob Edmond proposed a very suitable metaphor for this kind of convergence — ‘common strangeness’ — in the title of his book (2012).

work of one text and even one utterance or line. This principle generates cross-cutting self-reference and metatextuality, as in the poem “This Line” (Bernstein 1999: 315):

This line is no more than an
illustration of a European
theory. This line is bereft
of a subject. This line
has no reference apart
from its context in
this line. This line
is only about itself.
this line is stripped of emotion.

The poetry of the Russian Futurists is perhaps the main foreign source of inspiration for Charles Bernstein, along with Osip Mandelstam, Andrey Bely, and Boris Pasternak¹⁸. Due to not only the formal experimental nature of Futurism, but also the political, revolutionary power of its poetics. Of the Russian avant-garde authors, Velimir Khlebnikov is particularly significant for Language poets. For Bernstein, Khlebnikov worked to transcend the boundaries of language and languages in his zaum poetry and contributed to the search for a universal language. Along with Joyce, Wittgenstein, Mallarmé and Beckett, Khlebnikov, Bernstein believes, is one of the heroes of the linguistic turn in the twentieth century. The ‘breakthrough into languages’ carried out by the Russian Futurian, brings poetry to the level of world-transforming knowledge and thinking, which is what American poets also strive for.

Bernstein’s poetry itself, however, bears little resemblance to Khlebnikov’s work. There is almost no lexical creativity in it, no rationalistic attempt to create a new ‘alphabet of the mind’. Rather, zaum or trans-sense is practiced through the transgression of discourse; as Ian Probst, Bernstein’s Russian translator, writes, “this is a search for meaning hidden behind divergent stereotypes, so-called common sense or official political rhetorics” (cit. in Bernstein 2020: 10). This is Khlebnikov read through the lens of Wittgenstein’s language games and Barthes’ and Foucault’s discourse matrices.

Khlebnikov’s traces are more visible in Ian Probst’s Russian translations of Bernstein’s verse; especially in the ones that involve creative word-formation in the target language. The poem “Fold”, for instance, is translated not as “Складка”, but as “Складень”, hinting at the Russian tradition of icon painting. English tautologies like ‘pet my pet’ turn into root crossings of different parts of speech: ‘пестую моего домашнего пестуна’; ‘пытаю свою пытку’; ‘вью свое вервие’, etc. Non-existent but plausible and comprehensible words are also used: ‘утишаю свою тихость’; ‘нарекаю свое рекло’; ‘распожужу свою погоду’ and the

¹⁸ In an interview with the Russian artist Natalia Fedorova (Bernstein 2021), in particular, he notes the relationship between the poetics of Osip Mandelstam and Louis Zukofsky. Bernstein translated poetry by Mandelstam, as well as Khlebnikov and Kandinsky.

like. Neologisms such as ‘утверждение’ or ‘трансегментальное плавание’ echo Khlebnikov’s principle of ‘скорнение’. Bernstein’s translator is doing important work on the mutual pollination of the two languages — not just a simple semantic borrowing, but a poetic transformation of a text in another language. English and Russian differ not only in their structure (analytical and synthetic), but also — in terms of poetic function — in the principle of text generation. This is especially evident in translations of Language poetry. A translator from Russian herself, Lyn Hejinian¹⁹ explains this radical difference not only as a feature of the movement of thought, but also as the foundation of thinking itself: “American English is a broad language with enormous horizontal freedom, and Russian is a deep language with enormous vertical freedom” (2013: 65). In interlingual English-Russian translations, the breadth of one language resonates with the depth of the other, opening up new dimensions of expressiveness.

Charles Bernstein is also influenced by the Russian avant-garde artists Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, and Wassily Kandinsky — both as visual artists and writers. A key term for this reception is *faktura*. For Bernstein, this is the creation of verbal objects for reflection. *Faktura* is what allows you to see form and function in their linkage, where reflecting on a poetic device becomes an implementation of the device itself. The development of the theory of *faktura* and form as such by the Russian Formalists had as much influence on Language writing as Formalist poetry itself. What Marjorie Perloff termed ‘the Futurist moment’, implying both the chronological (moment of time) and physical (moment of force) meanings of the term, is the “emblem of the most radical moment of the period” (Bernstein 2016: 64).

Bernstein also likes to quote Viktor Shklovsky, in particular his seminal idea of ‘laying bare the device’ (‘обнажение приема’) pronounced first in “Art as Device”. The title of one of Bernstein’s poems contains an explicit reference to Russian Formalism, as well as an even more explicit intertext with Marcel Duchamp: “BALLAD LAID BARE BY ITS DEVICES (EVEN): A BACHELOR MACHINE FOR MLA”. The manifesto-like treatise *Artifice of Absorption* is also inspired by the Formalist concept of *device* as defamiliarization. According to Alexei Parshchikov, this “poem-treatise in itself is replete with a demonstration of the techniques that it describes” (cit. in Bernstein 2020: 402). Bernstein’s key term *artifice* echoes the title of Shklovsky’s manifesto in English, “Art as Device”.

The neo-formalism of the Language poets was not the result of a doctrine straightforwardly received from the Russians, but the product of cultural transfer, in which Formalist concepts reached them through a different culture and in a different chronotope. The form here was no longer the flagship of the revolution but was placed in the neo-avant-garde tradition as a countercultural criticism of art. Bernstein sometimes mocks the form: ‘It is this: FORM IS NEVER MORE

¹⁹ She has translated from Russian two books by Arkadii Dragomoshchenko: *Description* (1990) and *Xenia* (1994).

THAN AN EXTENSION OF MALCONTENT. There it went, flapping, more USELESSNESS' (1999: 111). Brushing aside the neo-formalists, he ironically calls his personal movement 'nude formalism' (cf. his book *The Nude Formalism*, co-authored with Susan Bee), as if Formalism had descended from Duchamp's scandalous painting as a bride stripped bare by her bachelors.

For Barrett Watten, just like for Fredric Jameson, the social and oppositional function of art and the social dimension of Formalist pathos are more important. He calls this type of theory 'Social Formalism': instead of meaning and content being emptied and everything remaining the same, the social exists in its forms and is realized through them. Watten connects this point of difference with Bourdieu's thesis in "Essay on a Theory of Practice", which explores the difference between social formalism, identified with a structuralist methodology that Bourdieu calls 'objectivist', and social formalism, which is concerned with "temporal forms by which societies regulate themselves, and more generally, the way that social conceptual systems are enacted in time" (Watten 1987: 371). A more recent essay by Watten, "Language Writing's Concrete Utopia", illustrates this point by looking to contemporary protest movements and their literary manifestations, namely, the radical formalism of Language Writing in the post-Occupy era, which is thought of as "a critical intervention of radical form that opens up a space for agency and reflection and is generative of new possibilities, seen through the medium of language" (Watten 2015: 112). A 'politics of poetry' advocated by Language Writers acts as an opposition to the commodified society and capitalist power.

Shklovsky and the textual politics of Russian Formalists push language poetry to search for new models of avant-garde textuality in a broader syntax of cultural meaning. As Lyn Hejinian put it, "Russian Formalism (like 'Language Writing') was a Utopian undertaking, but, as Jameson points out, a powerful Negativity is fundamental to its theory, since it assumes that paradox and revolution are characteristic of literary life" (1995).

In an early essay from 1909, "The Magic of Words", Andrey Bely, a pioneer of language-oriented poetry and precursor to the Formalist revolution in Russian theory and poetry, wrote: "Humanity is alive as long as the poetry of language exists; *the poetry of the language is alive*. We are alive" (1994: 142, *emphasis original* — V. F.). By invoking a 'poetry of language', Bely emphasises language as such, capable of generating poetic speech and of word creation. But he looked even further in "Aaron's Rod", an essay written just as the 1917 revolution was taking place, heralding a "poetry of the word" as "the goal of a new literature". For him, it was no longer a question of the poeticisation of language, but of the linguistic transformation of poetry itself.

In the 1970–1980s, American Language poets learned a lot from the early Russian avant-garde (though probably not from Andrey Bely who had not been

extensively translated at that time), as well as from its leading theorists Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky. A passage from Charles Bernstein's text "Today's Not Opposite Day" seems to precisely address these avant-gardes from distant yet neighboring continents (2001: 75):

Four score and seven years ago our poets brought forth upon these continents a new textuality conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all meanings are plural and contextual. Now we are engaged in a great aesthetic struggle testing whether this writing or any writing so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on an electronic crossroads of that struggle. But in a larger sense we cannot appropriate, we cannot maintain, we cannot validate this ground. Engaged readers, living and dead, have validated it far beyond our poor powers to add or detract. That we here highly resolve that this writing shall not have vied in vain and that poetry of the language, by the language, and for the language shall not perish from the people.

Given that this piece was written around the year 2000, "four scores and seven years ago" falls around 1912–1913, the very years when poetry made a 'break-through into languages' in Russia and the United States. The last phrase from Bernstein's quote, stylized in the manner of the Gettysburg address, amazingly also echoes Andrey Bely's century-old prophecy about the coming 'poetry of language'.

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У ПОТРАЗИ ЗА ПОЕТСКОМ ФУНКЦИЈОМ.
 АМЕРИЧКА „ЈЕЗИЧКА ПОЕЗИЈА“ РЕВИДИРА РУСКИ ФОРМАЛИЗАМ

Резиме

У раду се истражује утицај руског формализма на књижевне теорије и праксу „Језичке школе“ у америчкој поезији. Песнике ове школе формалисти су интересовали највише због везе с поезијом руског футуризма. Ипак теоријска мисао формалне школе била је једна од главних инспирација „Језичким песницима“ у залагању за нову језикоцентричну материјалну поетику. Теорија *онеобичавања* Виктора Шкловског и саме његове технике у књижевном писању имале су директан утицај на ЈезПо-ов осећај за књижевни стил и стратегије (у делима Лин Хецинијан, Барета Вотена, Рона Силимана, Чарлса Бернштајна и др.). Значај формалиста огледао се и у њиховој социјалној оријентацији: принципи МЛК-а и ОПОЈАЗ-а обновљени су у новим условима америчке алтернативне поетике 1970–1980-их. У чланку се такође разматрају одједи руског футуризма у неоавангардној америчкој поезији, као и дијалог између „Језичке поезије“ и руског постмодернизма (концептуализма и метареализма).

Кључне речи: руски формализам, америчка поезија, Језички песници, концептуализам, метареализам.