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The Tragedy of Early Literary Theory*

In my article, I will consider the tragedy of early modern literary theory in Eastern and Central Europe. I am going to address both the *genetivus obiectivus* and the *genetivus subiectivus* of the title phrase “the tragedy of theory”: the question whether the history of early modern literary theory is, or was, or can be presented according to the narrative structures of tragedy intersects with the analysis of the traces that the prodigious and monumental critical theory of tragedy from the early 19th century onwards has left in the methodological strategies of modern literary theoreticians.

In 1914, the dean of Polish “formalism,” Kazimierz Wóycicki, following Karl Vossler,¹ made a distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic literary history, the latter having its “own problems and autonomic special development”² different from the social and psychological issues concerning its extrinsic complement. Then Wóycicki goes on to say that the history of philosophy likewise deals, on the one hand, with refined reflections of social moods and world views, while, on the other hand, it consciously and consequently works on solutions of abstract methodical problems. Wóycicki argues that extrinsic and intrinsic literary history should be related to and reconciled with one another by the novel discipline of poetics,³ which is supposed to harbour objective and subjective complementary

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¹ Kazimierz Wóycicki, *Historia literatury i poetyka* (Warszawa: TNW, 1914), 48–65; Karl Vossler, “Das Verhältnis von Sprachgeschichte und Literaturgeschichte,” *Logos* II (1911–12): 167–178.

² Wóycicki, *Historia literatury i poetyka*, 51: “Własne problematy i autonomiczną specjalną historię.”

³ Wóycicki, *Historia literatury i poetyka*, 59.

components.⁴ As with Kant's aesthetical judgement and above all Goethe's *Urphänomen*,⁵ Wóycicki's poetics assumes that the objective (intrinsic) form of an aesthetic object corresponds to and enlivens the cognitive apparatus of a subject, immersed in the world and society.⁶ My claim is that the critical theory of tragedy, which similarly has its roots in German philosophy at the end of the 18th century, may be perceived as a mediator between the external and internal history of early modern literary theory, just as poetics was supposed to combine both aspects of literary history.

What I would like to provide with this article is, firstly, a short overview of the Russian formalist theory of tragedy and the tragic as it emerged in the context of the revolution and its grand festivals. Then, in the second step, I will reconstruct how the central themes of the theory of tragedy resonated in the main tenets of formalist literary history. As a final point, I will dwell on how our narratives on the history of modern literary theory develop along the lines of the tragic fables as they were identified by tragic theory.

1. *The Formalist Theory of Tragedy*

That the critical theory of tragedy is in fact able to link the social history of the literary theoreticians with the intrinsic developments of the autonomous discipline of literary theory was suggested to me by, among many other things, Boris Eikhenbaum 1919 essay "On tragedy and the tragic."⁷ At the beginning, Eikhenbaum seems to be another in a long line of thinkers – Schelling, Hölderlin, Hegel, Marx, Engels, Lassalle, Vischer, and others⁸ – who characterised the genre of tragedy

⁴ Wóycicki, *Historia literatury i poetyka*, 59.

⁵ Wóycicki, *Historia literatury i poetyka*, 64: Wóycicki closes his work with a quote from Goethe's poem beginning with "Wär nich das Auge sonnehaft, / Die Sonne könnt' es nicht erblicken."

⁶ Wóycicki, *Historia literatury i poetyka*, 61.

⁷ Boris Eikhenbaum, "O tragedii i tragicheskoi," in *Skvoz' literaturu. Sbornik stat'ey* (Leningrad: Akademia, 1924), 73–83; this important collection of essays contains the formative works on *skaz* and *verse*.

⁸ For more detailed reconstruction of the critical theory of tragedy see my German Habilitationsschrift *Tragödie und Revolution. Die kritische Theorie der Tragödie als Ästhetiken der Praxis in Deutschland und Polen 1789–1848*, to appear in 2017–18; its fragments were published as Michał Mrugalski, "Ästhetik der Revolution – Revolution der Ästhetik. Karol Libelt und der Berliner Polenprozess 1847," *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie* 68 (2012): 1–38; "Das Zeitalter des Aischylos ist angebrochen, mein Lieber.' Wagner, Bakunin, Słowacki über die griechische Tragödie und die schöpferische Zerstörung," *Zeitschrift für Slavistik* 57 (2012): 3, 265–292; "Metafizyka prezencji. Goethe i Hegel jako konstruktorzy naszego działania i myślenia a teoria mediów (teoria literatury)," in *Romantyzm w lustrze postmodernizmu (i odwrotnie)*, ed. Wojciech Hamerski, Michał Kuziak,

as pertaining to the situation of revolution and civil war. Eikhenbaum's many and prominent contemporaries, the classical philologist Tadeusz Zieliński,⁹ his son, the playwright, theatre specialist, and translator Adrian Piotrovsky, and the head of GAKhN Petr Kogan,¹⁰ likewise saw in the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary times a renaissance of tragic situations, forms, feelings, and interpretations. The great mass festivals of the Revolution, often called "mysteries", actualised not only *les fêtes révolutionnaires* of the French Revolution with their propensity to use antique costume and allegories, but also the arguably tragic narrative of a chain of felicitous defeats leading to the final victory.¹¹ Formalist Sergey Bernshteyn described the extensive development of choral declamation as the "natural and healthy fruit of the revolutionary era."¹²

Eikhenbaum suggests in the first pages of his essay that Russian literature is for the first time in its history capable of creating tragedy

and Sławomir Rzepczyński (Warszawa: UW, 2014), 241–268; "Konflikt konfliktów, konflikt poetyk. Dyskusja Karola Marksa i Fryderyka Engelsa z Ferdynandem Lassalle'em o tragedii historycznej *Franz von Sickingen* a estetyka konfliktu," in *Współczesne dyskursy konfliktu. Język – literatura – kultura*, ed. Włodzimierz Bolecki, Wojciech Soliński, and Maciej Gorczyński (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2015), 231–252.

⁹ Tadeusz Zieliński, "Sofokles i tragedia bohatera," in *Sofokles i jego twórczość tragiczna*, translated by Koło Klasyków UW (Kraków: KSW, 1928), 1–114, the essay, which puts tragedy in a post-colonial perspective, ends with a reference to modern Antigones (Vera Zasulich?) and Creons; by the way, Zieliński wrote the introduction to this volume of Polish translations from his Russian introductions to Sophocles's tragedies "during the carnival [w zapusty] of 1928."

¹⁰ Petr Kogan, *V preddverii griadushchego teatra* (Moskva: Pervina, 1921), 13–17, 22–28, 33–35.

¹¹ For the most concise narrative see James R. von Geldern, "Putting the masses in Mass Culture: Bolshevik Festivals, 1918–1920," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 31(4) (Spring 1998): 123–144; cf. James R. von Geldern, "Festivals of the Revolution, 1917–1920: Art and Theater in the Formation of Soviet Culture" (PhD diss., Brown University, 1987), 53, describes the first revolutionary mystery play *Eulogy of [the] Revolution* staged in Voronezh in 1918 and summarised by a roughly contemporary witness: "As the curtain was raised there was complete darkness on stage. Suddenly the sacrificial altar located center-stage on a platform was illuminated [= thymele – M.M.]. A chorus dressed in Greek tunics was distributed along the base of the platform. The show opened with a musical introduction. Then the chorus begins to sing [prologos – M.M.], explaining in the song the hard life of the oppressed people. Then the leader [coryphée? – J.R. v. Geldern] appears near the altar, and between him and the chorus a dialogue [kommos – M.M.] on the power and oppressiveness of Capital begins. All this is accompanied by music and ballet numbers." The show, in which also the allgorical figures of Evil Fate and Destiny appear, clearly pastiches Greek tragedy. See also, Daniel C. Gerould, "Revolution as Art: Soviet Mass Spectacles and the Paris Commune," *PAJ A Journal of Performance and Art* 37(2): 91–92; Aleksey Gvozdev and Adrian Piotrovsky, "Petrogradskiye teatry i prazdnestva v epokhu voennogo kommunizma," in *Istoriya sovetskogo teatra: Ocherki razvitiya*, ed. Vasily E. Rafalovich (Leningrad: GIKhL, 1933), vol. 1, 264–290.

¹² Sergey Bernshteyn, "Zvuchashchaya khudozhestvennaya rech' i ee izucheniye," *Poetika. Vremennik otdela slovesnykh isskustv GIII 1* (1926), 42.

(in the Formalist jargon, of “solving the problem” of “Russian tragedy”¹³). In the then current situation in literature and outside of it the accomplishments of, say, Sumarokov or – *horribile dictu!* – Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov*, whom Eikhenbaum does not even mention, must have seemed not tragic enough. Unintentionally following Hölderlin’s take on Aristotle’s narrative of the emergence of tragic drama from the intimate tragic ode,¹⁴ Eikhenbaum sees in contemporary lyrics, predominantly those of Mandel’shtam, a potential for shifting the focal plane of Russian literature from intimate, domestic, and family-like forms (*intimnye, semeynye*) to bigger and public ones resembling 17th century French classicism and Schiller’s later dramas, which he wrote after he had formulated his Kant-inspired theory of tragedy.¹⁵

Eikhenbaum’s prediction of the return of the (French classical and romantic) tragic, reinforced by an in-depth analysis of Schiller’s tragic theory and praxis as well as one of the then topical tragedies looming in Blok’s lyric poetry,¹⁶ initiated a stream of formalist research into the drama of French and Russian classicism and romanticism, especially tragedy (high and low) and its popular counterpart – melodrama.¹⁷ This formalist subgenre encompassed the works of both Leningrad and Moscow

¹³ Eikhenbaum, “O tragedii i tragicheskoi,” 73.

¹⁴ Eikhenbaum, “O tragedii i tragicheskoi,” 74: While Aristotle speaks about the choral chant of dithyramb, Hölderlin emphasised *die Innigkeit*, the intimacy of the tragic lyrical ode, out of which the most public form of drama should emerge; see Hölderlin, “Grund zum Empedokles,” in *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1962), Bd. 4, 149–162.

¹⁵ Schiller’s main theoretical utterances on tragedy that were written after the publication of all three of Kant’s critical works are “Über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen” (1790/91), “Über die tragische Kunst” (1790/91), “Vom Erhabenen” (1793), “Über das Pathetische” (1793), “Über das Erhabene” (1801), *Sämtliche Werke* (München: Hanser, 1962), Bd. 5, 358–371; 372–394; 512–537; 792–809; the tragic play, against which these tenets are measured by Eikhenbaum is *Wallenstein* (1798–1799).

¹⁶ Boris Eikhenbaum, “Tragedii Shillera v svete ego teorii tragicheskogo,” “Sud’ba Bloka,” in *Skvoz’ literaturu*, 85–151, 216–232.

¹⁷ Cf. Adrian Piotrovsky, “Melodrama ili tragediya!” in *Teatr. Kino. Zhizn’*, ed. E. Dobina (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1969), 63–65.

scholars: Boris Tomashevsky,¹⁸ Boris Yarkho,¹⁹ Grigory Gukovsky's²⁰ (in the 1940s one of Yury Lotman's initiators into literary studies²¹), Sergey Balukhaty,²² and Yury Tynyanov;²³ Viktor Shklovsky worked in a post-Eikhenbaum-mindset on tragedy and comedy and melodrama,²⁴ contemporary drama and theatre,²⁵ Soviet mass spectacles,²⁶ and circus, in the analysis of which he likewise heavily drew on Eikhenbaum's theory of tragedy: "making-difficult" (затрудненность) and "braking" (торможение) had been described by Eikhenbaum as the constitutive factors of the tragic plot (in *Hamlet* and *Wallenstein*) before they became under Shklovsky's pen the essential features of the otherwise formless art of circus.²⁷ Speaking of the theory of tragedy in the 1920s, one should also mention the contemporaries of formalism, as Hölderlin's translator Jakob Golosovker, Leonid Grossman, and the members of the so called Bakhtin circle.

This current of formalism, of course, neither wallowed in the tragic or apocalyptic sentiments of the symbolists nor did it try and upvalue

¹⁸ Boris Tomashevsky, *Teoriya literatury. Poetika* (Moskva: Aspekt Press, 1999), 116–150; Boris Tomashevsky, "Frantsuzskaya melodrama nachala XIX veka," *Poetika. Vremennik otdela slovesnykh isskustv GIII* 2 (1927): 55–82.

¹⁹ Boris Yarkho, "Komedi i tragedii Korneya (Etyud po teorii zhanra)," "Raspredelenie rechi v pyatiaktnoy tragedii (k voprosu o klassitsizme i romantizme)," in *Metodologiya tochnogo literaturovedeniya: Izbrannye trudy po teorii literatury*, ed. M. Shapir (Moskva: Yazyki slavyanskikh kul'tur, 2006), 403–549, 550–610.

²⁰ Grigory Gukovsky, "Lomonosov, Sumarokov, shkola Sumarokova," "O Sumarokovskoy tragedii," "O russkom klassitsizme," "Racine en Russie au XVIIIe siècle (La critique et les traducteurs)," "Racine en Russie au XVIIIe siècle (Les imitateurs)," in *Rannie raboty po istorii russkoy poezii XVIII veka*, ed. V. Zhivov (Moskva: Yazyki Russkoy Kul'tury, 2001), 40–72, 214–228, 227–328, 329–247, 348–367.

²¹ Lidia Lotman, "On byl nashim professorom," *NLO* 22 (2002), accessed July 19, 2016, <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2002/55/lotm.html>.

²² Sergey Balukhaty, "K poetike melodramy," *Poetika. Vremennik otdela slovesnykh isskustv GIII* 3 (1927): 63–86.

²³ Yury Tynyanov, "Argivyanе', neizdannaya tragediya Kyukhel'bekera," "O parodii," in *Poetika. Istoriya literatury. Kino*, ed. A. Chudkavov (Moskva: Nauka, 1977), 93–117, 284–309 (the latter deals with Sumarokov).

²⁴ Viktor Shklovsky, "Komicheskoye i tragicheskoye," in *Gamburskiy shchet. Stati – vospominaniya – esse (1914–1933)* (Moskva: Sovetsky pisatel'), 113–115.

²⁵ Cf. Viktor Shklovsky, "Sovremenny teatr," in *Gamburskiy shchet*, 103–119.

²⁶ Cf. Viktor Shklovsky, "Drama i massovye predstavleniya," "Papa, eto – budil'nik," "Kollektivnoye tvorchestvo," "O psikhologicheskoy rampe," "O gromkom golose," in *Gamburskiy shchet*, 85–86, 86–87, 88–89, 90–91, 91–92.

²⁷ Eikhenbaum, "O tragedii i tragicheskoye," 79–83; Viktor Shklovsky, "Isusstvo tsirka," in *Gamburskiy shchet*, 106–107.

the modern novel by comparing it to Greek tragedy, but rather it dealt with emblematic formalist problems, which on the material of tragedy appeared with model-like clarity, such as the mechanism of literary evolution, especially the relation of tragedy to comedy and melodrama,²⁸ the reactions of the contemporaries as the proper perspective in stating the evolutionary role of a phenomenon²⁹ (contrapuncted by the ideology of the elements of the past becoming *recognisable* only from the contemporary standpoint: the references to film and the futurists while describing the evolution of the tragic form became a commonplace³⁰), the artistic forms of space-time,³¹ the constructive principle of conflict and contrast, the role of emotions³² and morality³³ in art, the pure theatricality of melodrama and its making difficult in highbrow tragedy, pantomime, gesture as a hub of literary significance,³⁴ and last but not least *zaum*.³⁵ That there is a convergence between formalism and tragedy is made even more plausible by the fact that the Polish initiator of formalism, Kazimierz Wóycicki, also often referred to tragedy to prove his central points on style and composition,³⁶ even though he could not at the time have known the work of the Russian formalists, who were as technical about the tragic as he was.

While, for example, the symbolist Vyacheslav Ivanov, ontologising Hegel's logic and aesthetics, wrote in an ecstatic style about the Dyad

²⁸ Cf. Eikhenbaum, "O tragedii i tragicheskome," 73–75; Tomashevsky, "Frantsuzskaya melodrama nachala XIX veka," passim; Boris Yarkho, "Komedi i tragedii Korneya (Etyud po teorii zhanra)," "Raspredelenie rechi v pyatiaktoynoy tragedii (k voprosu o klassicizme i romantyzme)," passim; Shklovsky "Komicheskoye i tragicheskoye," passim; Tynyanov, "Argivyan'e, neizdannaya tragediya Kyukhel'bekera," passim; Tynyanov, "O parodii," passim.

²⁹ Cf. Tomashevsky, "Frantsuzskaya melodrama nachala XIX veka," 55–57.

³⁰ Cf. Eikhenbaum, "O tragedii i tragicheskome," 73; Tomashevsky, *Teoriya literatury. Poetika*, 138; Shklovsky "Komicheskoe i tragicheskoe," passim.

³¹ Cf. Eikhenbaum, "O tragedii i tragicheskome," 78–83; Balukhaty, "K poetike melodramy," 73–81; Tomashevsky, "Frantsuzskaya melodrama nachala XIX veka," 60.

³² Cf. Eikhenbaum, "O tragedii i tragicheskome," passim; Balukhaty, "K poetike melodramy," 63–67 and passim.

³³ Gukovsky, "O Sumarokovskoy tragedii," 220, even claims that Racine's tragedies did away with the category of morality! (Cf. Gukovsky, "Racine en Russie au XVIIIe siècle (Les imitateurs)," 352.)

³⁴ Cf. Shklovsky, "Komicheskoe i tragicheskoe," 114–115; Tomashevsky, "Francuzskaya melodrama nachala XIX veka," 62–69.

³⁵ Cf. Tomashevsky, "Frantsuzskaya melodrama nachala XIX veka," 78.

³⁶ Kazimierz Wóycicki, *Wykłady ze stylistyki i historii literatury*, ed. M. Adamski (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2015), 157–163, 190, 272–273, 280; Kazimierz Wóycicki, *Jedność stylowa utworu poetyckiego* (Warszawa: WTN, 1914), 10–12, 17, 21–22.

inherent in the One and unfolding in the eternal struggle of history,³⁷ the ironic and nominalist formalist perceived conflict, mostly carried out with the help of parody, as the constant in literary evolution (on the origins of parody in the interplay of tragedy and comedy, see section 2). The formalists, so to speak, reduced the essence of tragedy to its functional core and made it – as we will see in section 2 – the structural basis of their theory of literary evolution. The tragic core must, nevertheless, have remained noticeable for their contemporaries since Lev Vygotsky aptly recognised Shakespearian tragedy and catharsis as the fulfilment and complement of formalist aesthetics, not only in art but also in life,³⁸ whereas Bakhtin tried to remedy the inconsistencies of the formal school by introducing the notion of architectonics as a mediator between form and content, of which the tragic was the most telling example as a motivation of dramatic form.³⁹

The Russian formalists associated with scholarly institutions harbouring significant theatre studies, in which tragedy occupied centre stage. In Moscow, GAKhN was headed by the eulogist of the revolutionary tragic Petr Kogan, while the Sankt Petersburg based State Institute of Art History (GIII)⁴⁰ not only had its theatre section but also offered the Higher State Courses in Art Studies (*Высшие государственные курсы искусствоведения* (ВГКИ)). Tadeusz Zieliński's son, Adrian Piotrovsky, who was eponymous with the renewal of Greek tragic festivals under the revolution, forming a new "theatocratic" society,⁴¹ was appointed as the director of the courses. If it were true that the formalists were somewhat quiet about theatre, their silence would only render the other

³⁷ Vyacheslav Ivanov, "Sushchestvo tragedii," in *Dionis i pradiionisiystvo. Issledovaniya* (SPB: Aleteya, 1994), 295–306.

³⁸ Lev Vygotsky, *Psikhologiya iskusstva*, ed. V. Ivanov (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1986), 205–329.

³⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Problema sodержaniya, materiala i formy v slovesnom khudozhestvennom tvorchestve," in *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*, ed. V. Kozhinov (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1975), 19–21.

⁴⁰ The founder and long-time head of the institute, Valentin Zubov, had a propensity to perceive the revolutionary times according to the Hegelian theory of tragedy. In retrospect, his meeting with a Bolshevik leader Uricky resembles Creon's questioning of Antigone viewed in the light of what Hölderlin and Hegel said about the incongruence or mutual exclusiveness of their world-views: "По своему содержанию этот допрос не представлял особого значения, но этот разговор между двумя существами, принадлежавшими к двум совершенно разным мирам, совершенно неспособными понять друг друга и одинаково глубоко убежденными в справедливости присущего им миропонимания, был достоин античной трагедии." – V. P. Zubov, *Stradnye gody Rossii (1917–1925)*, accessed July 1, 2016, <http://you1917-91.narod.ru/zubov.html#002>.

⁴¹ Adrian Piotrovsky, "Teatr vsego naroda. Teatral'nyy kruzhok," *Zhizn' iskusstva*, 20–21 May 1920, 1.

voices more audible. When in the 1930s Piotrovsky was forced to renounce the idea of the renaissance of antiquity, he denounced as “formalist” the practice of renewing the Ancient Greek theatre staging.⁴²

Moving back to “On Tragedy and the Tragic” – Eikhenbaum’s 1919 take on the birth of tragedy repeats the typical formalist scheme of literary evolution: Evolution conceived in a formalist way is nothing other than a struggle of the domestic with the public, or an invasion of the public sphere conducted by the not-acknowledged, which in turn is a summary of Hegel’s theory of tragedy as a model of the bourgeois revolution, in which the private man, the subject of economy, challenges the public order of pure politics. My somewhat bold association of Eikhenbaum’s formalism with Hegel’s politicised, if not simply political, theory of tragedy is justified by a sudden twist in Eikhenbaum’s account, which soon switches from considering his own literary times to his proper topic, that is, the pure aesthetics of Schiller’s tragedy and at the same time Schiller’s aesthetics of pure tragedy as a foreshadowing of Russian formalism:

All these prophecies and questions [concerning Russian tragedy to come] served only as an excuse to have an opportunity to speak about tragedy and Schiller. The reader loves *motivirovka*, even if it were paradoxical. I don’t know whether I am right. But now I understand why I want to speak about it.⁴³

It is an OPOYAZ commonplace to become intensely personal while entering the meta-level at which a formalist applies the literary theoretical notions to one’s own scholarly practice and to speak in one breath about one’s devices and desires (as when Shklovsky made a case about becoming infected with Cervantes’s compulsion to digress from the subject, which happened to be the subject of digression as the be-all and end-all of narrating, and then turned to Cervantes’s narrative technique for methodological help⁴⁴). Eikhenbaum remains at this highly personalised meta-level and applies the device of estrangement to the genre of tragedy in order to re-pose Schiller’s and others’ question about the source of our enjoyment of tragic matters:

⁴² Nina Braginskaya, “Slavyanskoe vozrozhdeniye antichnosti,” in *Russkaya Teoriya 1920–1930-e gody: materialy 10-ko Lotmanovskikh chteniy* (Moskva: RGGU, 2004), 60.

⁴³ Eikhenbaum, “O tragedii i tragicheskom,” 74.

⁴⁴ Viktor Shklovsky, “Kak sdelan Don-Kikhot,” in *O teorii prozy* (Moskva: Federatsiya, 1929), 110–111, cf. 230.

“Pity and terror,” or “fear and compassion” – isn’t it funny, isn’t it silly to gather the viewers in a room and to play the whole evening in front of them different roles in order for them to fear and pity someone?⁴⁵

Literary theory uses here the crucial *priem* of literature: estrangement. Whenever a discourse wavers in such a way between the literary and the theoretical, the extrinsic and the intrinsic, the social and the aesthetic, the theoretical and the literary discourses, political revolution and “literary evolution,” we may assume that the critical theory of tragedy is at work because – as we shall see – it has been prototypical for such negotiations.

2. *The Critical Theory of Tragedy in Modern Literary Theory*

In this section, I would like to appreciate the fact that has already become apparent in the analysis of Eikhenbaum’s essay on tragedy: the formalists’ literary history was modelled after Hegel’s clash of Antigone with Creon. As is well known, Hegel parallels the tragic collision of right against right – Antigone against Creon or Oedipus the priest against Oedipus the tyrant – with the revolutionary situation then current in Europe where the bourgeois – the economical, domestic, underground, family-like, and feminine element – clashes with the official, political, and masculine.

Formalist literary history is undeniably and intentionally conflict-based. “The whole history of Russian syllabotonic verse” – writes Osip Brik – “was a fight (*bor’ba*) against syllabic verse in favour of the tonic system.”⁴⁶ One side is, moreover, typically associated with the unofficial, domestic, even feminine, whereas its adversary occupies the centre stage of a social literary system. This is typically illustrated by Russian folk tonic verse, melodrama becoming the constructive model for Romantic tragedy, or Tynyanov’s account on the genre of letter.⁴⁷ The main force of the conflictual literary history is by all accounts parody. Tynyanov, who introduced parody as the main force of literary evolution, harkens back in the last sentences of his formative essay to the emergence of Old Comedy from tragedy and at the same time to Hegel: “Parody exists,

⁴⁵ Eikhenbaum, “O tragedii i tragicheskome,” 75.

⁴⁶ Osip Brik, “Ritm i sintaksis,” in *Texte der Russischen Formalisten*, ed. J. Stiedter, W.D. Stempel (München: Fink, 1972), vol. 2, 178 [it is a bilingual anthology].

⁴⁷ Yury Tynyanov, “Literaturny fakt,” “O literaturnoy evolyutsii,” in *Poetika. Istoriya literatury. Kino*, 227–252, 255–269, 270–281.

but in the dialectical play with a device. If the parody of tragedy results in comedy, a comedy parodied may turn out to be a tragedy.”⁴⁸

But the analogy of literary history (resp. evolution) with tragic narrative extends even further than its conflictual nature and the genesis of parody, its main force. In Eikhenbaum’s book on Lermontov from 1924, the assumption that literary history is in essence a chain of conflicts leads to the emergence of the typically tragic chronotope, which is twofold or simply contradictory. Just as in *Hamlet* and *Wallenstein*, analysis of which two tragedies filled the second part of Eikhenbaum’s 1919 essay on tragedy, in literary history there is a force at work that precipitates change and development and there is the second, contracting force. The latter does not so much slow down the action of literary history as tear the heroes out of the stream of becoming, so that they appear to be clear models, essences of the literary process, or masks assumed by the forces of literary history without names.⁴⁹ That tragedy demonstrates essences of things on stage was a commonplace of criticism;⁵⁰ under Eikhenbaum’s gaze literary history is scientific only to the extent that it shows the essence of the conflict which is the perpetually returning basic mechanism of all literary historical development.

In this literary history, in which the names of writers are but the ideal masks of Greek cultic heroes, Lermontov stands for a room in which realism clashes with romanticism.⁵¹ Typically for the texts carrying the echoes of the classical critical theory of tragedy, Eikhenbaum relates this conflict, whose name is Lermontov, to revolution. To be precise, Lermontov substitutes or defers the revolution: “the time of revolution has not yet

⁴⁸ Yury Tynyanov, “Dostoevsky i Gogol’ (k teorii parodii),” in *Poetika. Istoriya literatury. Kino*, 266: “Пародия вся – в диалектической игре приемом. Если пародией трагедии будет комедия, то пародией комедии может быть трагедия”; Tynyanov’s “On parody” (*Poetika. Istoriya literatury. Kino*, 284–309) belongs to the current of the formalist studies of tragedy as it concerns, among others, Sumarokov’s tragedies.

⁴⁹ Boris Eikhenbaum, *Lermontov. Opyt istoriko-literaturnoy otsenki* (Leningrad: Leningrad, 1924), 8: “Мы изучаем не движение во времени, а движение как таковое — динамический процесс, который никак не дробится и никогда не прерывается, но именно поэтому *реального* времени в себе не имеет и измеряться временем не может. Историческое изучение открывает динамику событий, законы которой действуют не только в пределах условно выбранной эпохи, но повсюду и всегда. В этом смысле, как это ни звучит парадоксально, история есть наука о постоянном, о неизменном, о неподвижном, хотя имеет дело с изменением, с движением. Наукой она может быть только в той мере, в какой ей удастся превратить реальное движение в чертеж.”

⁵⁰ Most famously, Georg von Lukács, “Metaphysik der Tragödie: Paul Ernst,” in *Seele und Formen. Essays* (Berlin: Fleischel, 1911), 330.

⁵¹ Eikhenbaum, *Lermontov*, 10.

come, but the necessity of reform was felt absolutely clearly.”⁵² The time of revolution is, then again, described in Eikhenbaum’s earlier study *Young Tolstoy* (1922); it is against romanticism that Tolstoy introduces the device of estrangement, which in his early works on the Caucasus destroys the romantic aura. In a battle against romanticism, Tolstoy’s battle scenes are estranged by introducing a perspective of a hero who does not understand the goings on, what is important and what is not: “in this way the romantic aura is destroyed”⁵³ – says Eikhenbaum.

But then again, Tolstoy beats romanticism at its own game as the figure of estrangement descended from the romanticism of, say, Percy Bysshe Shelley, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Adam Mickiewicz, and Richard Wagner.⁵⁴ The device, with which Tolstoy wanted to compromise romanticism, was used by the romantics themselves to retain romanticism’s identity, an identity that consisted of an incessant surpassing of itself. In Tynyanov’s article on Pushkin’s *A Journey to Arzrum during the Campaign of 1829* [Путешествие в Арзрум во время похода 1829 года], that is, to the mystified Caucasus which was the arena where Tolstoy would use militant estrangement, the narrator of Pushkin’s prose also practiced the device of estrangement, although the name of the device is not cited in the essay from the catastrophic year 1936. Pushkin’s narrator acts as if he “refused to judge the hierarchy of objects and events he describes, of what is and what is not important. This all brings about a distortion of perspective.”⁵⁵ The position of estrangement in formalist literary history corresponds to the tragic reconciliation: The two sides of the clash – romantic and anti-romantic – fight with and for the same thing – estrangement that enlivens perception and changes the perceptive on life. “Tolstoy’s descriptions of battles in *War and Peace* bear visible traces of the author’s studying of Pushkin’s prose, and to be exact his *Journey to Arzrum*” – writes Tynyanov.⁵⁶

⁵² Eikhenbaum, *Lermontov*, 12.

⁵³ Boris Eikhenbaum, *Molodoy Tolstoy* (Peterburg and Berlin: Gryzhebin, 1922), 93: “‘остраннение’ батальной темы, так разрушается романтический ореол.”

⁵⁴ Omri Ronen, *Serebrianyy vek kak umysel i vymysel* (Moskva: OGI, 2000), 127–128; Svetlikova, *Istoki russkogo formalizma*, 75–77, 81–82. As is well known, Pushkin wrote in a letter to Zhukovsky from 1825 that the purpose of poetry is poetry itself: “Ты спрашиваешь, какая цель у ‘Цыганов’? Вот на! Цель поэзии – поэзия... ‘Думы’ Рылеева и целят, а все невпопад,” accessed January 1, 2016, <http://grammar.ru/LIT/?id=1.18>; likewise in “Poet i tolpa,” the category of *pol’za*, benefit, is being denigrated.

⁵⁵ Yury Tynyanov, “О ‘Puteshestvii v Arzrum’,” in *Pushkin: Vremennik Pushkinskoy komissii*, AN SSSR (Moskva and Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1936), 67.

⁵⁶ Tynyanov, “О ‘Puteshestvii v Arzrum’,” 67.

And so formalist literary history was modelled on tragedy to the extent that it emblazoned the fight of the unofficial and private against the acknowledged and established, which eventually laid bare the fact that both sides are but instances of one monumentalising force of literary history that eternally returns wearing different masks and names. Exactly this perpetual nature, which combines change and eternity, parallels the tragic chronotopos, which formalist literary history adopted, with the idea of revolution.

3. Formalism as Tragic Hero

But formalism itself was a tragic affair in that its history (*res gestae*) repeated the same schemata as the literary history it produced. As in Eikhenbaum's essay, so in formalism in general: the tragic functions as a passageway between autonomous models and the extrinsic history of a school. Specifically, the inception of formalism resembled the tragic rebellion of the domestic against the official. The sources the formalists quoted most were testimonies of poets speaking about their craft (*pro domo sua*). The poets either were the formalist's personal friends or wrote quotable letters to friends that were suddenly transported into the public sphere or, like Goethe, had personal conversations with young men who eventually published them. In other words, the knowledge the formalists made public pertained to the poets' private and professional, economic lives, but not necessarily to their public appearance. What had been domestic and feminine, passed from generation to generation from master to pupil (ephebos) or circulating between intimate friends, became a public and political affair. Formalism started, then, like the beginning of a tragedy. The question is whether it led to a tragic outcome – a demise and rebirth or, at least, a boost of life?

The making-tragic of the history of early literacy theory begins at the latest with Jakobson's "On a Generation that Squandered its Poets" (1930): the account of the clash between the great mythical time of the futurist's future with the everyday (*byt*) harkens back to Tadeusz Zieliński's rendering of the meaning of Sophocles's heroic tragedy as, precisely, the clash between the great mythical time and the everyday (*byt*).⁵⁷ Jakobson had a weak spot for Zieliński's model as he also relied

⁵⁷ Roman Jakobson, "O pokolenii, rastrativshem svoich poetov," in *Selected Writings*, ed. S. Rudy and Martha Taylor (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), vol. 5, 355–381; According to Maria Depperman Andrej Bely's essay "Fridrich Nitsshe" (http://az.lib.ru/b/belyj_a/text_04_1908_arabesky.shtml, accessed August 17, 2016) made out the conceptual armature of Jakobson's stock-taking of formalism/futurism and its (their) conflict with its (their) contemporaneity (Maria Depperman, "Nietzsche

on it in his propagandistic piece “The Beginning of National Self-Determination in Europe” (1945) in which the mythical past of Grand Moravia, with its spontaneous and free self-organisation of the people, is set against the subsequent history of the Continent.⁵⁸

Eikhenbaum is renowned for making the notion of *byt* the basis of literary sociology;⁵⁹ his “Literaturny byt” from 1927 likewise tells the story of how the revolutionary zeal of the futurist-formalist formation subsides and gives way to the mundane details of literary life and thus in a way prepares the ground for Jakobson’s narrative of the clash of the mythical time with the everyday, but Eikhenbaum’s pitch is lower, more novelistic than tragic, if you will. It is as if Eikhenbaum – starting from the same premise of the moment of recognisability, with which he began his essay on tragedy and the tragic – calmly gives an account of the end of revolutionary and tragic phase of poetry and its criticism in Russia and of how the interest of scholars and authors alike shifts from conflictual evolution and intensive form (both problems were “motivated” by the 19th century theory of tragedy) toward the more prosaic problems of material well-being. Here, the triumph of the everyday over rampant formalism and futurism is related with epic remoteness, very unlike to Jakobson’s elegiac tones. But even in Eikhenbaum’s novelistic, definitely not tragic, approach to the history of formalism and the group’s research on literary development, there are elements of tragedy, like the equating of *byt* with

in der Sowjetunion. ‘Den begrabenen Nietzsche ausgraben,’ in *Nietzsche-Studien. Internationales Jahrbuch für die Nietzsche-Forschung*, Bd. 27, 1998/99, 492). I would say that Biely’s essay on the tragic philosophy of Nietzsche, who supposedly was the man of the future masked as our contemporary, helped to move the great mythical time, as he was described by Zieliński, from a fictional past that never actually took place into the future, which became mythical. But Zieliński perceived the mythical past as a mask or costume for the future dream; the heroic past was mythical by virtue of being a projection screen for men obsessed with the future (*Sofokles i jego twórczość tragiczna*, 4–6). Plus, both Jakobson and Zieliński consider *byt*, “the everyday,” as the main enemy of the mythical time, while in Bely the word *byt* does not appear even once.

⁵⁸ I had this association when Tomáš Glanc held his talk during the Warsaw panel, the result of which is the present volume.

⁵⁹ Boris Eikhenbaum, “Literaturnyj byt,” in *O literature* (Moskva: Sovetsky pisatel’, 1987), 428–436.

a struggle by different groups⁶⁰ or with the fate, *sud'ba*, of an author.⁶¹ *Byt* is a great spectacle of a conflict and a living author is supposed to put on a mask of its *obraz*, image, to take part in it.

It does not surprise then, that many, if not most, historical narratives on formalism or early literary theory overall are indeed informed by the theory of tragedy, but inconsequentially, because mechanically, out of a mental habit that had been building up since the beginning of the 19th century. The formalists, aiming at perpetual recognition, gave an impulse to write the history of their movement according to tragic schemes, but since they discretely passed *over* their models, the subsequent authors passed *on* the initial impulse in a perfunctory way. The usual story went that heroic formalism, acting in the name of the freedom (autonomy) and unity of literary studies, rose against the inert and heterogenic positivism of the 19th century and was then crushed by this very positivism under the guise of (Pseudo-)Marxist geneticism. Only after its tragic death did formalism triumph as the knowledge of the future. In our time, however, the novelistic model initiated by Eikhenbaum has won the upper hand: intellectual historians, driven by an ambition to complete and in consequence complicate the image of the epoch, have been avoiding tragic austerity and clear-cut oppositions, while introducing new heroes, new details, and new nuances. Nevertheless, this novelistic approach runs, firstly, the risk of overlooking the fact that the first choice of the formalist historians, even Eikhenbaum (as we saw above), was *tragic* simplicity. Secondly, just as Eikhenbaum's novel on *byt* harbours tragic conflicts carried out by masks, the novelistic dissolution of the single-line narrative of formalism's evolution inscribes itself willy-nilly into a tragic narrative. Whoever devotes his studies to all the inexhaustible particulars of the epoch, tends to oppose the great, mythical, and ridiculously reach past, peopled by such an array of charismatic characters, to the destitute present, when politics is not as political as it used to be; post-colonialism is not as exploratory and daring; the actual sexual revolution was replaced by scholastic divisions conducted by gender studies, and so on. Thus

⁶⁰ Eikhenbaum, "Literaturnyj byt," 433–436; Aage A. Hansen-Löve, "'Bytologiya' mezhdru faktami i funktsiyami," in *Revue des études slaves*, tome 57, fascicule 1, 1985: B. M. Ėjxenbaum: *la mémoire du siècle, sous la direction de Catherine Depretto*, 91–103 (on '*bor'ba* in *byt*' 96–103); Yury Tynyanov wrote as early as 1924 that, in the time of literary struggles and revolutions, after an old formation had lost its momentum, but no new one gained the upper hand over the literary field, literary *byt* becomes a stand-in for literature itself (Yury Tynyanov, *Problema stikhotvornogo yazyka. Stat'i* (Moskva: Sovetsky pisatel', 1965), 172–173, endnote 1).

⁶¹ Cf. Eikhenbaum, "Sud'ba Bloka"; Hansen-Löve, "'Bytologiya' mezhdru faktami i funktsiyami," 96–98.

a popular attempt to escape the tragic narrative backfires and the spectre of the conflict between the mythical time and the dull everyday rises again as the only excuse for, and *motirovka* of the interest for the antiquated theories.

However, the critical theories of tragedy were proleptic constructions: they left room for the reader's decision in favour of either freedom or inertia. Under their influence, it becomes difficult for us, as intellectual historians, to dodge the question of whether we want to consciously bring out the tragic scheme in our narratives or to abandon it completely.

Abstract

In my article, I describe the tragedy of early modern literary theory in Russia and Poland – both as a set of beliefs concerning the literary genre and as a metahistorical scheme, which was and still may be applied to the intellectual history of the humanities in Eastern and Central Europe. My claim is that the critical theory of tragedy, which has its roots in German philosophy at the end of the 18th century, may be perceived as a mediator between external and internal history – genesis and evolution – of early modern literary theory. The article provides, firstly, a short overview of the Russian formalist theory of tragedy and the tragic as it emerged in the context of the revolution and its grand festivals. Then, in the second step, I reconstruct how the central themes of the theory of tragedy resonated in the main tenets of formalist literary history. As a final point, I dwell on how our narratives on the history of modern literary theory develop along the lines of the tragic fables as they were identified by tragic theory.

Key words: the critical theory of tragedy; genesis and evolution; contradictive chronotopos; underground and polis; Kantian and political revolutions

