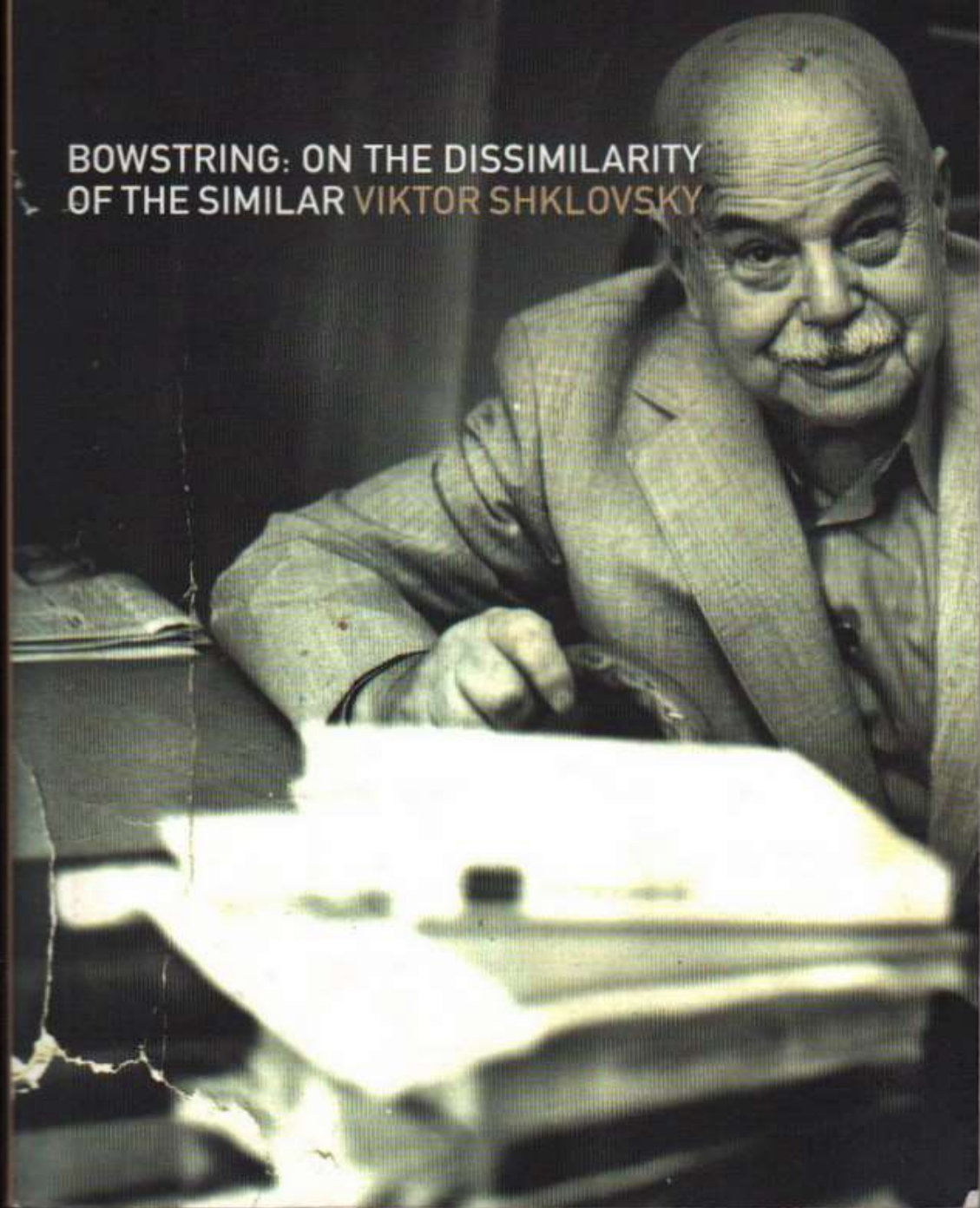# BOWSTRING: ON THE DISSIMILARITY OF THE SIMILAR VIKTOR SHKLOVSKY

The combination of high and low styles in *Dead Souls*, *The Overcoat*, and *The Diary of a Madman* is motivated differently in each work but it's certainly there. We can also find a combination of several genres in *Poor Folk*.

This shows that the subject of a story or its style of narration can incite different relations in a single work.

Interrelations are usually given as interrelations of styles, whereas one of the styles is taken to be traditional and the other as newly created.

This is why in literature it's important to study not the separate features of a certain work but the meaning of each feature in the system of that work, and furthermore to determine whether we are dealing with a monologic or a polyphonic work.

Archaists and Innovators

Tynjanov was beginning his work on *Archaists and Innovators*. I suggested a title that would express his ideas more clearly: "Archaists—Innovators." Akhmatova was about to agree with me. Tynjanov knew where his work was going. He studied the laws of the emergence of the new—the dialectic of literature—the revelation of reflection, which as though subverted the reflected object. Let me explain this in terms of the university.

The building of the university faced the Peter and Paul Fortress.

With years, new structures like the Stock Exchange and Rostral Columns emerged on the Spit of Vasilyevsky Island—this was a shift to another system.

The Stock Exchange and the fork in the river that was formed by it became the dominant in the construction of systems. By this time, the canals were already nonexistent and the island wasn't cut up into strips.

Various architectural ideas can coexist in a large city, and they are perceived in their contradiction.

Leningrad—and before it Petersburg—is a system of systems and it's more beautiful than the buildings built in it, because the city belongs to a different, much grander architectural design.

The exteriority of the city itself contains history—the change of forms in their simultaneous coexistence.

The journals of Russian aesthetes, such as *Apollon*, reproached bitterly but to no avail the architects who introduced disharmonious structures in the city's ensemble. But didn't the heavy helmet of St. Isaac's Cathedral clash with the high spire of the Admiralty? And didn't the sprawling Admiralty building, in turn, clash with the tightly assembled Cathedral confined to its quadrangular space in the square?

Generally in art, and that also means in architectural ensembles, collisions and transformations of the sign—the message—are important.

Let's imagine that the source of the message communicates an unchanging image or a sum of constant signs. We will lose our concentration and stop reacting to the system of identical signs. The mechanism of attention is built so that it grasps the sign of change of impression the quickest. Old systems are placed in parentheses, as it were, and perceived as a whole.

But great systems of architecture get supplanted, forcing one another out and then connecting in new, unexpected complexes.

That's how the Moscow Kremlin was built.

It is evident in architecture that the old remains because stone is everlasting. The old is preserved and revived in the new.

This is less obvious in literature.

In the meantime, old literary phenomena will be revived not only on the library shelves—as books, but also in the consciousness of the reader—as norms.

For his analysis of the relation of new genres to old ones, Tynjanov started from the simplest—by analyzing the literary fact. The literary fact—a semantic message or communication—is most clearly perceived at the moment of introducing the new phenomenon into a previously existing system, at the moment of change.

The most important feature in genre formation is the battle of systems, which enters the semantic meaning of the literary work and embellishes it.

As a system, genre constantly evolves, which is why all static definitions of genre must be replaced with dynamic ones.

Tynjanov wrote in the essay "The Literary Fact" (1924):

> All attempts at a single, static definition will fail. We have only to cast a glance at Russian literature to realize that this is so. All the revolutionary essence of Pushkin's *poema* (long poem) "Ruslan and Lyudmila" lay in the fact that it was a non-*poema* (the same can be said of his "Prisoner in the Caucasus"). This claimant to the genre of the heroic *poema* turns out to be a frivolous "tale" of the eighteenth century, one which, however, makes no excuse for its frivolity; the critics sensed that it was some kind of an exception to the genre system. In fact the work was a *dislocation*

of the system. The same can be said with regard to particular elements of the *poema*: the "hero," the "character" in "Prisoner in the Caucasus," was deliberately created by Pushkin "for the critics," the plot was "a *tour de force*." *And again the critics perceived this as an exception to the system, a mistake, and again this was a dislocation of the system.*[73]

The fact that *Eugene Onegin* was not a novel but a novel in verse made a "devilish difference" for Pushkin.

The ironic introduction through an unintroduced character was fortified with the intricate strophic structure of the novel.

Tynjanov generally argued that the literary genre dislocates itself; it evolves in a broken line. The dislocation takes place at the expense of the basic features of the genre.

What does it all mean?

The change of particular elements in a literary composition was analyzed by old theorists, including the prominent scholar Aleksandr Veselovsky. They studied changes in the methods of narration, creation of parallelisms, and evolution of the hero.

It is as though the history of literature was transformed into a bundle of separate multicolored threads and pulled through the eye of a specific literary composition.

They argued that art evolved independently from life, and didn't reflect or cognize life. It then appeared that art was as if static, that it could be repositioned, shaken up, as it were—senior genres became junior genres, but nothing new emerged.

---

73 Yuri Tynjanov. "The Literary Fact." Translated by Ann Shukman. *Modern Genre Theory*. Ed. David Duff. Harlow: Longman, 2000.

I read an article in the *Literaturnaya gazeta* (The Literary Gazette), which I think was titled "Realism Is Life." But what is life? Obviously it's something that constantly changes, or, to oversimplify—life is history, it is change. We must agree then that realism is the change of methods for cognizing the changing life, otherwise it will resemble the reality of the town of Glupov (Foolsville) depicted in one of Saltykov-Shchedrin's novels, where at a certain point "history comes to a standstill."[74] We ought to understand that Gogol's realism isn't the same as Dostoevsky's or Tolstoy's, and that Sholokhov's realism can't be similar to Tolstoy's realism, because the subject of cognition as such changes.

In literary theory, as in the history of literature, theorists studied any literary phenomenon through a historical lens both in relation to the concrete content of the phenomenon itself and in relation to other phenomena.

The battle for historical concreteness had to begin with the battle for precise definitions—what is literature? This was Tynjanov's method.

The change of separate literary facts in a composition was never as important as the change of systems that maintained an unchanging final purpose. That purpose could have been artistic eloquence which, in order to sustain, artists kept changing their methods of reflection.

We always knew that literature evolved but we never emphasized that this "evolution" moved through strange leaps and abrupt transitions, which left the contemporaries in awe and indignation.

74 Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, *Istoriya odnogo goroda* [The History of a Town], 1869–70.

The classicists were replaced by the sentimentalists, they in turn—by the romanticists, and the latter—by the realists.

The transition from one system to another was always marked as a break, a turning point.

Inside these vast, transforming systems were individual authorial systems that kept supplanting one another.

The functions of the landscape in Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Chekhov, for example, are different. Some of the signs are partially (and deliberately) preserved, but their interpretations are drastically changed.

The so-called "art schools" are directions, alternations of systems of expression.

Pushkin's youthful poem "Ruslan and Lyudmila" incited both delight and resentment. You can already sense the clash of systems in this early work. His artistic conceptions that came after provoked even more objections. The tension of shifting systems grew. The reader didn't always want to know Pushkin's intentions, he was baffled by the author's voice as if it were the voice of a stranger.

In order to understand what is being said, it is critical to know who is speaking and what is being communicated to you. Sometimes when you hear the beginning of a telephone conversation, the words are incomprehensible at first, but as soon as you understand who the speaker is, the conversation shifts into the system of re-cognition, the system of your relations with that person, and everything becomes comprehensible, even though sometimes you are told things that demand effort to understand . . .

The seemingly pointlessness, hopelessness in Pushkin's "The Little House in Kolomna" appears to be a liberating fact from a semantic decision imposed from the outside, yet at the same time it

redirects the attention to new spheres of reality. The paradox of the difficult and triumphant form of the octaves describing the everyday life in Kolomna prepares, as though, tomorrow's stage not for comedy but for tragedy involving new heroes.

Tynjanov was showing the purposefulness of art and the presence of history in the very process of artistic construction, thus asserting the eternity of a literary work.

This notion of the eternal does not suggest "eternal rest."

A literary work needs a pathway to slide through time, as it were, transferring the meaning of the events to a new realm.

Tynjanov deliberately wrote about the multifaceted nature of a literary work; it is even today not yet well understood.

They are now attempting to create a mathematical theory of aesthetics and its application to poetry.

Mathematical analysis grasps how a poem operates, shows the relation of a given poet's language to literary discourse and to conversational discourse.

But this raises new obstacles for us.

Language as such is not a unified system; it is an interrelation of several systems of verbal structures.

The word has its own history; it enters into new associations with other semantic constructions and refines verbal expressions through reinterpretation.

The poetic form is multi-layered and exists simultaneously in several temporal realms.

In *Archaists and Innovators*, Tynjanov elucidated one of the instances of the interrelationship of different systems. The system of Karamzin, Dmitriev, and Zhukovsky was not a wrong system but

it wasn't the only possible one. The system of the archaists wasn't unified—the archaism of Krylov's fables didn't coincide with the archaism of Katenin's ballads. But archaism in general was opposed to the poetics of "Arzamas."

But when it turned out that the Karamzinian style failed to express or couldn't fully express the epoch of 1812, the archaistic moments intensified in their meaning.

Pushkin turned out to be a synthesizer of the two systems.

Forms that existed in the works of the archaists, or were accepted by them, acquired a new function in Pushkin.

There was a period when the Karamzinists absolutely rejected archaisms such as *sei* (this) and *onyi* (that). Decades later, Karamzin himself started *History of the Russian State* with the word *sei*.

Pushkin started *The History of Pugachov's Revolt* with *sei*, too, but this determined the importance of the event to the State; the book was originally titled "The History of Pugachov."

"*Sei* (This) Pugachov"—the Pugachov of *The Captain's Daughter*—was a ruler, tsar of peasant justice.

In his attempts to represent reality, in other words, to understand it, the writer creates a poetic model of reality. The model, of course, is not eternal because life keeps on flowing.

The writer might need reinterpreted elements from old systems for the construction of his new model.

Systems link up, they argue with and parody each other, entering the language of individual characters and acquiring new motives.

The political failure of Decembrism made it impossible for the Decembrist poetics to evolve any further, but it didn't disappear completely and continued to exist in the polemic.

Tynjanov chose Kyukhelbeker and Griboedov as the heroes of his prose works and subjects of critical study.

The General Meaning of Tynjanov's Pronouncements

Working on the interrelations of the Karamzinist and archaist poetics and studying the poetry of Kyukhelbeker and Griboedov, Tynjanov established first of all that the verse of Griboedov and Krylov was not accidental but governed by certain laws.

At the same time he showed, or he speculated, the law of dislocation—the battle of systems in a live composition.

He was able to see the drama—the drama of thought, the dialectic of history in art.

According to Friedrich Engels, "The first capitalist nation was Italy. The close of the feudal Middle Ages, and the opening of the modern capitalist era are marked by a colossal figure: an Italian, Dante, both the last poet of the Middle Ages and the first poet of modern times."[75]

By repeating this, we are asserting the fact of dialectical opposition and reinterpretation of poetic systems within the composition itself that is often felt by the poet himself.

Elements of a new poetics appear in the second book of *The Divine Comedy*. In the following lines from *Purgatorio* XI Dante is saying that new grass doesn't stay green for long:

75   From the Preface to the Italian edition of *The Communist Manifesto*, 1893.