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Lev Petrovich Yakubinsky

ON LANGUAGE & POETRY

Three Essays

*Translated from the Russian, edited and
with an Introduction by Michael Eskin*

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Introduction

The Forgotten Formalist

Even among the cognoscenti—linguists, literary critics, and cultural theorists—the name ‘Yakubinsky’ will not necessarily ring a bell. But it should: for his significance for modern poetics and criticism can hardly be overestimated. Occasionally mentioned in academic literature on early twentieth-century Russian and Soviet literary and linguistic scholarship, he has remained virtually unknown outside a small circle of specialists. Eclipsed by such luminaries as Viktor Shklovsky, Yury Tynyanov, Boris Eikhenbuam, Roman Jakobson, and others who came to represent the so-called ‘Russian formalist’ movement, which he co-founded and which revolutionized the way we look at and interpret literature and culture to this day, Yakubinsky has been relegated to the footnotes of modern intellectual history. Thus, the book you are now holding in your hands can be viewed as a recovery mission of sorts, aiming to give a powerful,

unduly forgotten thinker the historical credit he deserves by making his work widely available in English, and to broaden and enrich our overall perspective on and understanding of the vagaries of modern literary and cultural theory. Together with Yakubinsky's book-length essay *On Dialogic Speech*—originally published in the Soviet Union in 1923 and first published in English in 2016—the present volume gathers some of Yakubinsky's historically and critically most relevant writings, giving the non-Russian-speaking reader the opportunity to engage with this influential mind first-hand.

*

Born in Kiev in 1892, Lev Petrovich Yakubinsky studied philology and linguistics at Kiev and Petersburg Universities from 1909 to 1915, during a period of change and renewal in Russian linguistics, which had up to then been dominated by neogrammarian positivism and historicism. Originating in Leipzig, Germany, in the 1870s, and subsequently making its way to Russia, the neogrammarian school—represented, among others, by Eduard Sievers (1850-1932)

and August Leskien (1840-1916) in Germany, and Fillip Fortunatov (1848-1914) in Russia—postulated the existence of *a priori* phonological laws and held that the description of the historical transformations of language(s) should take precedence over the investigation of living speech in its concrete, dynamic and generative, aspects. This abstract, ‘de-humanized’ approach to our most important and ubiquitous social and cognitive medium was eagerly contested by a group of young scholars and critics—no doubt inspired and fueled by the fermenting cultural-political atmosphere leading up to and surrounding the October Revolution of 1917—who were far more interested in the functional and social diversity of language as an individual and collective activity.

“The word is now dead,” proclaimed Viktor Shklovsky, one of the group’s most vociferous members, as early as 1914 in his famous manifesto “The Resurrection of the Word”: “We have lost our connection to the world, we no longer feel it ... Only the creation of new forms ... will restore our lived experience of the world

[oshshyushsheniye mira], resurrect things, and kill pessimism.” (Shklovsky, by the way, was not alone in issuing a clarion call in the name of restoring “our lived experience of the world” by means of language. At roughly the same time, another young literary formation, the so-called Acmeists—in explicit opposition to the Symbolist doctrine of *a realibus ad realiora* [from the real to the ideal]—campaigned for exactly the same goal: “our lived experience of the world [oshshyushsheniye mira],” as Mandelstam famously put it in his 1913 poetic manifesto “The Morning of Acmeism.”)

What better way to make good on Shklovsky’s ethical imperative, insofar as it is premised on breathing new life into language, than to begin by investigating the most self-conscious and self-reflexive form of linguistic activity: poetry (and literature more generally). The founding by Shklovsky and a cluster of friends and colleagues at Petersburg University of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language [OPO-YAZ: Obshchestvo po Izucheniyu Poeticheskogo Yazyka] in 1916—which, in dialogue with the

so-called Moscow Linguistic Circle, developed what came to be known as ‘Russian formalism’—was designed to do just that: teach us to see and feel the world anew—“as if for the first time,” as Shklovsky wrote in his seminal essay “Art as Device” (1917)—by teaching us to attend to language in a new way. And this new way of looking at language, in turn, which would be different from previous linguistic approaches, hinged on the categorical distinction between *poetic* and *practical* language. More specifically: on the distinction between the two modes of language not in respect to their *what* so much as in respect to their *how*; not in respect to *content* and its variously conceived referential relation to the world (a question sufficiently dealt with by Aristotle and his followers) so much as in respect to *form*—in respect, that is, to the *technical ways*, the material, semiotic *devices* (phonological, morphological, syntactic, grammatical, rhetorical, etc.) that arguably distinguish literary from ordinary or practical language (and, in turn, obviously impact content). “The methodological distinction and juxtaposition of poetic

and practical language,” Boris Eikhenbaum summed up in his retrospective 1925 essay “The Theory of the *Formal Method*,” “served as the foundational principle underlying the formalist approach as a whole.”

Enter Yakubinsky: for, as Eikhenbaum observes in the same essay, it was none other than “Yakubinsky who introduced this distinction,” thus laying the methodological cornerstone for Russian formalism. Shklovsky, too, underscores Yakubinsky’s role as the movement’s methodological progenitor: referencing his work multiple times in “Art as Device,” Shklovsky credits Yakubinsky with the insight that “the two languages [poetic and practical] do not coincide” and that “the laws governing poetic language are diametrically opposed to those governing practical language.” The text in which Yakubinsky first posited and elaborated this signal dichotomy appeared in OPOYAZ’s inaugural anthology *Essays on the Theory of Poetic Language* in 1916 and was titled “On the Sounds of Poetic Language.”

*

Given that Russian formalism constitutes a central historical-conceptual matrix and reference point for such later, historically imbricated, schools of thought as, among others, structuralism (its immediate successor), post-structuralism, deconstruction, and new historicism—all of which in one way or another appropriated, further developed, modified, critiqued, or departed from it—Yakubinsky must be considered a true “initiator of discursive practices,” to use Michel Foucault’s phrase. As Foucault explains in “What Is an Author” (1969): what distinguishes “initiators of discursive practices” from other types of authorship—novelists, say—is that they not only “make a certain number of analogies possible” by providing patterns that can be variously adopted by others; but, more importantly, that “they also make a certain number of differences possible” by “opening up a space for discourses different from theirs, yet belonging to the field which they have initiated.” Precisely this kind of space was opened up, not exclusively of course, by Yakubinsky’s “On

the Sounds of Poetic Language”—a founding document of modern poetics and literary theory—which is made available in English for the first time.

*

What was it about Yakubinsky’s categorical distinction between poetic and practical language that made “On the Sounds of Poetic Language” such a key text? After all, the conception of literature as different or deviating from ordinary language in itself would certainly not have been news given its long tradition from Aristotle through the modern period.

What made Yakubinsky’s particular take on this subject arguably so transformative, was the prism through which he chose to refract it—linguistics coupled with psychology and epistemology:

In practical verbal thinking, we don’t focus on the sounds of words; we don’t consciously pay attention to them, they don’t possess independent value, merely serving communication. It is precisely this lack of conscious attention to

sounds in practical language that explains why many slips of the tongue go unnoticed, and why we can easily get away with sloppy articulation, slurring endings or entire syllables ... When it comes to poetic language, the situation is reversed: we do become consciously aware of the material texture of words, we are enjoined to focus on their sounds above all ... A poetic utterance's rhythmicality, for instance, bespeaks the conscious experiencing of sound in the process of poetic creation (poetic verbal thinking) ... rhythm in verse depends on the syllables' specific phonic make-up, for example on their consonant count. Consequently, our perception of and attention to rhythm in poetry is inseparable from our conscious awareness of its sound patterns.

Yakubinsky's explanation as to why poetic and practical language—which he characterizes as types of verbal thinking—need to be considered distinct modes communication sets the stage for at least two of formalism's and structuralism's defining claims about language and art: it prefigures Shklovsky's immensely influential notion of “demamiliarization” as the most basic aes-

thetic “device”; and it also anticipates Roman Jakobson’s key structuralist concept of the “poetic function” as the dominant linguistic function in literature.

Taking his cue from Yakubinsky’s discussion of the psychological-cognitive dimension of our engagement with literature—which emphasizes conscious experiencing and awareness, as well as our focus on the words’ very materiality—Shklovsky writes in “Art as Device” (in arguably one of the most well-known paragraphs in modern aesthetic theory):

In order to restore our lived experience of the world and feel things again, in order to make a stone a stone again, we have something called art. The goal of art is to transform our experience of things from [simply] recognizing them to [consciously] seeing them; the device of art consists in the ‘defamiliarization’ of things and in the complication of forms, which slows down perception and makes it more difficult ... [I should note that Shklovsky also mentions another, highly technical, essay by Yakubinsky as a conceptual reference point: “The Accumulation

of Identical Liquids in Practical and Poetic Language,” published in 1917. Because this piece presupposes the reader’s ability to follow intricate linguistic description in several languages, including German and Russian, however, it is not included in the present volume.]

If it is the process of slowing down perception—which means taking the time to *consciously* and *attentively* look at what is before us—that makes the familiar, the “unnoticed,” unfamiliar and noteworthy, then Yakubinsky can plausibly be said to have implicitly adumbrated the principle of “defamiliarization.”

Concomitantly, if what distinguishes poetic from practical language above all is the former’s ability to draw our attention to itself in its very materiality, then Yakubinsky can be said to have anticipated Jakobson’s famous definition in “Linguistics and Poetics” (1960) of the “poetic function” as “the set (*Einstellung* [Germ.: attitude]) toward the message as such, focus on the message for its own sake.”

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After the Russian Revolution, Yakubinsky gradually moved away from his fellow formalists' preoccupation with poetry and literature. Aligning himself with the new Communist regime, which frowned upon the formalists' lack of interest in the ideological and political aspects of literature and art, Yakubinsky turned to exploring the social dimension of language in its "phenomenal immediacy," as he puts it in his groundbreaking 1923 essay "On Dialogic Speech."

The very first study devoted entirely to the forms of speech in their concrete intersubjective manifestations, "On Dialogic Speech" is also the first study addressing the linguistic, psychophysiological, pragmatic, semantic and socio-political aspects of dialogue, which Yakubinsky implicitly credits with the weakening of authority and power (as opposed to the natural "alliance that monologue has with authority"). As I have suggested in my foreword to the first English edition of "On Dialogic Speech" (2016), Yakubinsky's essay can thus be said to anticipate the Bakhtin circle's seminal writings on the transformative power of dialogue, as well as

such disciplines as socio-linguistics, pragmatics, and cultural and postcolonial studies, insofar as the latter appropriate and strategically implement the concept and potential of dialogue as a liberating force. (Ironically, in coming down on the side of dialogue as opposed to monologue, “On Dialogic Speech” ostensibly undermines its author’s own ideological position.)

“On Dialogic Speech” can also be said to describe and theorize, *avant la lettre*, our contemporary culture of texting, tweeting, messaging and emailing—the twenty-first-century equivalents of “passing notes” (in class, meetings, and so on), which Yakubinsky singles out as a unique hybrid “between mediated (written) and unmediated (properly dialogic) communication.”

*

For the remainder of his life, until his death in 1945, Yakubinsky worked mainly on problems in linguistics sanctioned by the powers that be. Expertly navigating the political waters of Leninism and Stalinism, Yakubinsky became a successful, highly respected professor of linguis-

tics at a number of Soviet institutions—including the Volodarsky Institute for Agitation—and penned essays such as “Lenin on the ‘Revolutionary Phrase’” (1926), “The Language of the Proletariat” (1931), “The Russian Language in the Age of Proletarian Dictatorship” (1931), “On the Language of the Classes” (1932), and “Soviet Linguistics” (1934), to name only a few.

Among these later works, all of which toe the Communist Party line, one stands out, however: “Ferdinand de Saussure on the Impossibility of Language Politics” (1931). And even though this essay, too, is written from an ideologically invested position, and could thus be accused of tendentiousness, the critique it brings to bear on Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1857-1913) posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics* (1916)—one of the most influential theoretical works of the modern era—is not in any way vitiated by Yakubinsky’s political views. For in his close reading of Saussure these views are relevant only insofar as they are premised on the fundamental notion that political change can be effected through language; and since this notion

is certainly not unique to Communism—far from it: one could argue that all political change begins with and in language, and depends on it—the critique Yakubinsky levels against Saussure reveals itself as issuing, above all, from a logically and factually plausible vantage point that could be—and indeed has been—occupied by other critics wishing to address Saussure’s vexing inconsistencies.

What Yakubinsky takes exception to in particular is Saussure’s postulate that language “eludes our will” and is thus beyond our control, which, in turn, entails the “impossibility of a revolution in language.” For “if Saussure is right,” Yakubinsky notes, “then any organized intervention in the linguistic [and, by extension, political] process, any organized societal attempt at impacting the direction of this process, that is, any language politics become impossible.” And that’s something, it is safe to say, that not only Yakubinsky disagrees with: over half a century after Yakubinsky’s critique of Saussure’s perceived ‘quietism’, Derek Attridge—in one of the most insightful and subtle readings of Saus-

sure, titled “Language as History/History as Language: Saussure and the Romance of Etymology” (1987)—would speak precisely to this issue. After citing the same passage from the *Course* as Yakubinsky—“Not only would an individual, even if he wanted to, be utterly incapable of changing the choice that has been made by language, but the social mass, too, has no power over a single word”—Attridge comments: “There is, in fact, plenty of evidence that languages do change as a result of . . . intervention: one example is the existence of spellings and often pronunciations which reflect ‘reforms’ . . .”

Yakubinsky doesn’t stop here, though. Intent on understanding how Saussure could have possibly arrived at such a “misguided” view, he proceeds—in a radical about-face in his own thinking—to a full-scale deconstruction of the basic tenets of Saussure’s linguistic enterprise as a whole (and thus, by implication, of some of the conceptual underpinnings of much subsequent theory), attacking each of Saussure’s four “most essential” arguments, “on which all others

depend,” concerning our “powerlessness” vis-à-vis language, namely:

- (1) the “arbitrary character of the sign” (which, by the way—as Saussure, a great connoisseur of the Romantic tradition, certainly knew—Wilhelm von Humboldt had already adumbrated in *On the Structural Differences of Human Languages and Their Influence on the Intellectual Evolution of Humankind* [1836], when analyzing the ostensibly arbitrary “articulation” of “thought” and “sound”);
- (2) the “multitude of signs necessary for the constitution any language”;
- (3) the “overly complex character of the system”;
- (4) the “resistance of collective inertia to all linguistic innovation.”

Having subscribed, in “On the Sounds of Poetic Language,” to “the common view of contemporary linguistics,” namely, that “we have no reason at all to assume that there is an internal connection between the sound of a word and its meaning” and that this “connection is determined through association by contiguity, and [is] merely factual, rather than natural”—in other

words, that it is “arbitrary”—Yakubinsky now argues the opposite: the “true nature of the connection” between a word and its meaning is “completely different from Saussure’s description of it”; “the formula of the ‘arbitrariness of the sign’ . . . as well as Saussure’s theory . . . as a whole are misguided,” for the “connection between a word and its meaning is historically conditioned” and, thus, *not* at all “arbitrary.”

Saussure’s second error, according to Yakubinsky, consists in positing a functional (and factual) link between the (potentially) infinite quantity of signs in a language and its amenability to displacement by its speakers. Why should a “multitude of signs” in itself prevent the latter? It might require effort, certainly, but effort does not necessarily translate into impossibility. Why, Yakubinsky asks, should “a partial transformation of language by its speakers” be impossible, for instance?

Saussure commits a related error in suggesting that the complexity of language as a system represents an impenetrable bulwark against user intervention. Why, though, should systemic

complexity and innovation be mutually exclusive? Mainly, Saussure argues—and Yakubinsky doesn't fail to swiftly eviscerate this dubious claim—due to the majority of speakers' "ignorance" and presumed lack of interest (and where-withal) to engage in sustained "reflection" on the workings of language, which Saussure adduces as a precondition for its transformation. (Here, too, by the way, the degree of potential difficulty and effort involved does not at all entail the impossibility of the project, or doom it to failure.)

Finally, claiming that a community's collective resistant inertia presents an insurmountable obstacle to linguistic initiative is historically (and logically) untenable—resistance, after all, is known to have been broken on occasion, as Yakubinsky amply documents with particular attention to the language reforms that created contemporary Czech.

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What makes Yakubinsky's take on Saussure so significant today, however, I believe, is not his critique *per se* so much as its 'prescience'—its 'foreshadowing' of similar or related criticisms

brought to bear on the Swiss linguist decades later. "... let us ask," Derek Attridge enjoins, implicitly articulating the concerns of an entire generation of post-Saussurean critics, "how we might acknowledge the feedback of history into the here and now, and the determination of language not by 'blind' forces [as Saussure suggests] but by human, social, and political agency, both conscious and unconscious. To do so would mean regarding language as inherently unstable, internally (and eternally) shifting ..." Yakubinsky, it would appear, had already accomplished this task of "regarding language as inherently unstable" half a century earlier.

*

One can't help but wonder whether the trajectory of modern poetics and cultural theory might have been different (if ever so slightly)—and if so, how?—had Yakubinsky's writings been part of the global critical conversation all along? We will never know, of course. But at least, now that they are finally available in English, we can revisit some of the stops along the way and re-

examine them in the new light provided by Yakubinsky's pioneering work.

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A final remark on the third text featured in this book, "Where Do Poems Come from?": this short companion piece to "On the Sounds of Poetic Language" shows a side of Yakubinsky that doesn't come out in his other writings—playful, humorous, tongue-in-cheek. Its heavy reliance on Freud is especially noteworthy given its historical-political context in the early years of the Soviet Union: soon enough psychoanalysis would be routed as bourgeois anathema.