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# From 'Neophilology' to 'Sociological Poetics': Alternatives to Formalism in Literary Scholarship Leningrad in the 1920s

## Abstract

The emergence of 'sociological poetics' in Leningrad is traced through a discussion of research projects developed at Institute for the Comparative History of the Literatures and Languages of the West and East (ILiAZV). The development and revision of certain ideas of A.N. Veselovskii in the work of the Formalists and their opponents is discussed, with particular reference to the group of scholars led by Desnitskii: Ioffe, Medvedev, Voloshinov, and the emergence of 'semantic palaeontology' in the work of Frank-Kamenetskii and Freidenberg. The binary opposition of Formalism and Marxism that dominates most accounts of the period is questioned, and the work of what is now called the 'Bakhtin Circle' appears in a new light.

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Historical accounts of the development of Soviet literary theory in the 1920s tend to present a simplistic binary opposition of Formalism and Marxism, with the work of what is now called the 'Bakhtin Circle' emerging between them as something exceptional. This needs to be reconsidered. Whatever the polemical statements of representatives of intellectual movements, a careful analysis of the development of literary scholarship in the 1920s presents a much more varied and interesting picture. Alongside polemical interventions by Formalist and Marxist thinkers, we can find a range of sophisticated research projects that drew on the insights of Formalist thinkers but sought to overcome Formalism on the basis of a historical materialism irreducible to the shrill posturing of the opportunistic dilettantes in the literary press. These projects, I shall argue, had an importance that has generally been underestimated, and were important preconditions for some of the ideas of the Bakhtin Circle. In order to understand the significance of these ideas, we need to move beyond the ideologies and personalities of the debates, and to view their work as part of collective research projects carried out within Soviet research institutes.

I begin with the reception of one of the founders of comparative literature, Aleksandr Nikolaevich Veselovskii, among Soviet literary scholars in Petrograd. The relationship between the Formalists gathered in the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (Obshchestvo izucheniia poeticheskogo iazyka, hereafter OPOIaZ) and the work of Veselovskii has attracted much comment over the years (see, for instance, Erlich 1969, pp. 26-32; Cassedy 1990, pp. 61-63; Kujundzic 1997, pp. 8). Rather less attention has been paid to the way in which Veselovskii's legacy stimulated not only the development of the 'so-

called formal method', but also the 'sociological method' that constituted its chief intellectual competitor in the 1920s. Indeed, the development of what became known as 'sociological poetics' has been the object of comparatively little scholarship at all, despite the fact that it was no less original than Formalism. Instead, two contributions to the field have been torn from their institutional and wider intellectual contexts and presented as products of one informal group of scholars, now known as the Bakhtin Circle, or even disguised products of Mikhail Bakhtin himself.

The history of Russian Formalism has similarly been dominated by considerations of the ideological divisions between the Moscow Linguistic Circle (Moskovskii lingvisticheskii kruzhok, hereafter MLK) and the Petrograd OPOIaZ rather than focus on the debates and projects within the institutions in which the Formalists and proponents of alternative paradigms worked. Here I will make a modest attempt to redress the balance by discussing the rise of sociological poetics within one crucial institute, the institute that began as the Veselovskii Institute (Institut im. Veselovskogo, later renamed the Institute for the Comparative History of the Literatures and Languages of the West and East (Nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut sravnitel'noi istorii literatur i iazykov Zapada i Vostoka, ILIaZV, and subsequently the State Institute for Discursive Culture (Gosudarstvennyi institut rechevoi kul'tury, GIRK), which constituted one of the bases of both the Formal and Sociological methods.<sup>1</sup> My argument is that important aspects of Veselovskii's intellectual legacy were developed at the institute, leading to significant developments of both the 'formal' and 'sociological' methods.

### **The Neophilological Society and the Veselovskii Institute**

It is perhaps worth going back before the Revolution to see the institutional connection between Veselovskii's work and that which emerged at ILIaZV. The forerunner was probably the so-called 'Neo-philological Society', which brought together linguists, literary scholars and orientologists at St Petersburg University. The archives contain the following statement of the society's orientation from 1897:

Neophilology is the science that, for the resolution of questions about the processes and laws of spiritual development of man, addresses itself to the observation of the immediate, real

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<sup>1</sup> I will refer to the institute as ILIaZV throughout what follows. On other aspects of the work at ILIaZV see Brandist (2006 and 2008)

phenomena of life and, on the basis of these, reaches conclusions about suggested analogous phenomena in the past; on the basis of the study of contemporary dialects [govor] and newly formed words it works on questions about the birth [zarozhdenii] and development of languages; on the basis of the observation of general [obshche-] psychological processes, of associations and differentiations of representation, it establishes the laws of poetic creation. Various branches of culture enter into its orbit, for it is one unified by the commonality of the main object of study, that is, man in the different forms of his spiritual activity. Neo-philology studies monuments of the past, but does not isolate this past from the present; it deals with what is ancient but, in contradistinction to archaeology, primarily with ‘living antiquity’<sup>2</sup>

The society involved Veselovskii (from 1885) and Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (from 1909), who together are generally regarded as some of the most important influences on OPOIaZ, but they were also foundational for the development of sociological poetics.<sup>3</sup> Though Veselovskii died in 1906, his student Vladimir Shishmarev (from 1887) continued his legacy and carried this over to ILIaZV, where he led projects to continue the publication of his teacher’s works. Members of the society included the linguist Lev Shcherba (from 1903), the philologist and archaeologist Nikolai Marr (from 1907), the literary scholar Petr Kogan (1910) the linguist and literary scholar Viktor Zhirmunskii (October 1912), the brother of the prominent OPOIaZ formalist Viktor Shklovskii, Vladimir Shklovskii (Dec 1912) and the philologist Vladimir Peretts (from 1896). According to the society’s archives, Baudouin’s students, who became prominent Soviet linguists and were early participants in OPOIaZ, were also involved: Evgenii Polivanov was very active in the society during 1910,<sup>4</sup> while Lev Iakubinskii is shown as participating in several discussions and delivering a paper ‘O foneticheskikh emotsiakh u Lermontova’ (On Phonetic Emotions in Lermontov) in March 1913.<sup>5</sup>

When the Veselovskii Institute was formed in 1921 it was to some extent a resumption of the work of the Neophilological Society, with Shishmarev, Shcherba, Marr, Peretts, Iakubinskii, Zhirmunskii and, for a time, Vladimir Shklovskii all playing significant roles. Shishmarev and Peretts were the most faithful adherents to Veselovskii’s ideas, continuing to develop

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<sup>2</sup> PF ARAN 208/4/3a/3ob. The document is ‘Po povodu pervogo desiatletia Neofilologicheskogo Obshchestva (byvshego Otdeleniia po romano-germanskoj filologii) pri S.Peterburgskom universitete’ signed by F.D. Batiushkov, 1897.

<sup>3</sup> This and subsequent information about dates of membership derive from Anon (1914).

<sup>4</sup> PF ARAN R.IV, Op.24, d.4,

<sup>5</sup> PF ARAN R.IV, Op.24, d.4, l.164.

what Zhirmunskii called Veselovskii's 'working hypotheses' to explain various historical phenomena rather than trying to integrate them into a fully developed theoretical perspective.<sup>6</sup> The formal and sociological methods developed as two attempts to provide a theoretical perspective based on aspects of Veselovskii's work in the 1920s, and towards the end of the decade a new, third perspective emerged that would be called semantic palaeontology. While the Formalists established their main base at the State Institute for the History of the Arts (Gosudarstvennyi institut istorii iskusstv, hereafter GIII), Boris Eikhenbaum, Boris Tomashevskii and Iurii Tynianov, who had worked with Iakubinskii and others at the Petrograd Institute of the Living Word (Institut zhivogo slova, hereafter IZhS) from 1919 also played significant roles at ILIaZV.<sup>7</sup> While Marr presided over the linguistic section of the institute, Iakubinskii acted as its secretary. By this time Iakubinskii, who was, according to Viktor Shklovskii (1966, p. 127), Baudouin's favourite student, had moved away from his formalist work and was setting up the Laboratory of Public Speech with the Symbolist philosopher Konstantin Erberg in the institute, thus carrying on his work at the IZhS and its successor.<sup>8</sup> The publication of a series of articles on Lenin's language published in the journal LEF in 1924, which included most of the Petrograd formalists, was organised as a project within ILIaZV, and there were several projects and personnel that straddled the two institutes.<sup>9</sup> If the formal method became dominant at GIII, ILIaZV was the centre for the development of the historical and sociological methods in Petrograd. The main orientations of the institute, which had linguistic and literary sections, were spelled out explicitly:

- 1) Problems of international and intra-national linguistic and literary exchange on the basis of the socio-economic, political and general cultural interaction of peoples and countries.
  - a) The interaction of linguistic units (national and class languages, ethnic and social dialects and so on);

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<sup>6</sup> Zhirmunskii 1938, p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> On IZhS see Vassena (2007) and Brandist and Chown 2007)

<sup>8</sup> Erberg had been the Head of the Oratory Section at IZhS, and decisively shifted his research activity to the question of the 'living word' in the 1920s. On this aspect of Erberg's work see Brandist 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Shklovskii (1924) Eikhenbaum (1924); Iakubinskii (1924); Tynianov (1924) Kazanskii (1924). The account of the work of the 'Commission for the Study of the Language and Style of V.I. Lenin' is at RGALI (SPb) 288/1/13/19ob.

- b) International literary exchange in connection with the social development of peoples and countries that are in literary interaction.
- 2) The study of the languages and the oral art (tvorchestvo) of the contemporary city, village and the national minorities of the USSR, along with the peoples bordering East and West on the basis of their socio-economic, political and general-cultural development.<sup>10</sup>

Kogan soon moved to Moscow and, along with Vladimir Friche and Pavel Sakulin, became three of the main contributors to the development of sociological poetics in Moscow, especially centred at the State Academy of Artistic Studies (Gosudarstvennaia akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk, GAKhN), and at the Institute of Language and Literature (Institut iazyka i literatury, IIL), the Moscow sister institute of ILIaZV, where Friche was director and Polivanov head of the Linguistic Section.

### **Veselovskii and beyond**

The Formalists took from Veselovskii an understanding of literature as irreducible to the works of individual writers, but something that had evolved in a law-bound way. While Veselovskii held poetic forms evolved in connection with general forms of social and individual psychology, which shows his enduring connection to *Völkerpsychologie*, he attempted to draw some methodological boundaries to prevent the assimilation of literary phenomena into general anthropological discourse (see Byford 2005). He also sought to escape the boundaries of ‘national tradition’, or ‘Indo-European heritage’ that still dominated philology. Poetry’s ‘lawfulness’ becomes a precondition for the possibilities of individual works, and for establishing the boundaries of literary scholarship as an object domain. It is one of the main tasks of literary science to reveal poetic laws, and it is here we also see Veselovskii’s enduring connection to positivism. As Lev Georgevich Iakobson pointed out in an article of 1928, Veselovskii’s historical methodology drew much from Henry Thomas Buckle’s (1821-62) attempt to establish the laws that govern human progress and Hippolyte Taine’s (1828-93) approach to literature as the product of the author’s environment (Iakobson 1928, pp. 13-14). Literature is differentiated from other aspects of verbal culture because of it belonging to what August Comte had called a ‘positive stage’ of cognition, having transcended mythical and metaphysical stages. The Formalists sought to radicalise this

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<sup>10</sup> RGALI SPb 288/1/39/1ob

aspect, by developing rigorous methods aimed at establishing the laws of the positive stage, initially as a synchronic agglomeration of regularities, and later invoking the idea that literariness was a *Gestaltqualität* generated by semiotic mechanisms, which constitutes a specifically literary *ustanovka*, or ‘mental set’, on the world.

While clearly productive of new insights, the Formalists lost sight of other aspects of Veselovskii’s work, specifically the relationship of dependence of poetic forms on other forms of what he had called ‘verbal art’ (*slovesnoe tvorchestvo*), and on earlier stages of semantic and psychological evolution. The influence of the *Völkerpsychologie* of Heymann Steinthal and Moritz Lazarus, whose lectures Veselovskii and the other formative influence on early Soviet literary theory, Aleksandr Potebnia, attended in Germany in 1862-3, was particularly important in shaping this element of Veselovskii’s work. Indeed, both Veselovskii and Potebnia went on to publish in the organ of the *Völkerpsychologie* movement, the ‘Journal for *Völkerpsychologie* and Linguistics’ [*Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*] (Toporkov 1997, pp. 338-9), and to apply the principles of the new discipline in their works (See Berezin 1976, pp.9-39; Zhirmunskii 1939). In their early works the Formalists also downplayed Veselovskii’s concern with the historical aspects of literary evolution and the bases for the transmission of literary forms across cultural boundaries (Gorskii 1975, pp. 173-91).

When the Formalists did begin to try to account for these phenomena they struggled successfully to integrate a properly historical dimension into their work. One of the earliest attempts by members of OPOIaZ was Tynianov’s 1924 essay ‘*Literaturnyi Fakt*’ (Tynianov, 1993), in which the author marshalled a range of metaphors from social theory and political discourse to discuss the relative prominence of specific literary genres at different points in history (See Daly 2013). Genres were now viewed simultaneously as engaged in a struggle for position within a hierarchical order, jostling to claim the centre of literature and thus consigning other genres to the periphery. Each genre is defined by a ‘constructive principle’ that seeks to ‘colonise’ other genres through a literary ‘imperialism’. Such metaphorical conceptions were generally viewed either as opportunism or desperation by Marxist critics, and this perception was to colour the reception of Eikhenbaum’s work on the professional life of writers, the ‘*literary lieu*’ (*Literaturnyi byt*, Eikhenbaum 1987 [1927]).

Vasilii Desnitskii (1878-1958), head of the literary section of ILIaZV, later characterised the Formalists as ‘alien to historical thinking’ and claimed they ‘rendered Veselovskii’s

formulations scholastic, by depriving them of historical conditioning and the concreteness of content' (Desnitskii 1938, p. 69). It was precisely these aspects of Veselovskii's heritage that were the focus of the collective research projects that developed at ILIaZV, on literary exchange, sociological poetics and the palaeontology of plots. Each project accepted the need to specify the autonomy of the literary sphere, but regarded the Formalist attempt to do so as a reification of the literary. While literature was irreducible to forms of discursive activity that precede it both temporally and ontologically, it nevertheless remained connected to them at a 'molecular' level, as it were. The projects thus sought to trace the factors that governed the emergence of the poetic as well as the specificity of the poetic itself.

Desnitskii's role in the development of early Soviet literary scholarship has seldom been subject to any sustained consideration, and he is often mentioned solely as the person who brought the famous dispute between formalists and Marxists in March 1927 to a close with a vote.<sup>11</sup> This is despite the fact that important figures such as Zhirmunskii and Boris Tomashevskii considered him to be one of their teachers, while Valentin Voloshinov was one of those who worked under Desnitskii's supervision. Indeed, Desnitskii played a leading role among researchers at the institute. A complex figure who had been a party activist at the time of the first Revolution of 1905 and had collaborated with Aleksandr Bogdanov and Maksim Gor'kii on the Party school on Capri, Desnitskii viewed Marxism as a materialistic monism and this came to be identified with a sociology of the sort that pervaded the most influential textbook of the 1920s, Bukharin's *Istoricheskii materializm* (Historical Materialism, 1921 and many subsequent editions). While clearly maintaining some respect among Party members and administrators within the administration, Desnitskii had long ceased to be a Party representative within the institutions to which he belonged. Moreover, while he certainly pursued a Marxist agenda within institutions, he took considerable risks defending intellectuals who came in danger of repression in the 1930s, such as the poet Nikolai Zabolotskii and the literary scholars Boris Tomashevskii, and Pavel Medvedev. Looking back on the time at ILIaZV, Desnitskii characterised the institute as preparing young scholars 'in the spirit of the tradition of Veselovskii (an atmosphere of the international nature of literature, the multiple connectedness of specific national literatures, an atmosphere of multilingualism, the closeness of scientific attention to language and literature)' (Desnitskii 1938, p. 71).

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<sup>11</sup> The materials of the dispute have now helpfully been collated by Ustinov (2001).

Zhirmunskii claimed that it was chiefly through Desnitskii that ‘Marxism came to Leningrad historians of literature’ (Zhirmunskii 1971, p. 102). This influence was probably because he was particularly sensitive to the shortcomings of the literary scholarship being pursued by early Soviet Marxists. In formulating their theoretical ideas, Desnitskii argued that Marxists had often made the same error as the Formalists in that they also tended to focus on Veselovskii’s works on poetics, taking its abstract generalisations in isolation from the historical discussions in which they were always embedded. Instead of taking on and critically overcoming Veselovskii’s legacy as a historian, they had bypassed discussion of it. The attempts to formulate a ‘sociological method’ that had resulted, and here he seems to have had the Moscow (Friche-Kogan-Sakulin) school in mind, were therefore one-sided and unsuccessful, and it was the task of the literary section at ILIaZV to correct this problem by bringing theoretical poetics and historical scholarship into continual dialogue. While significant progress had been made, the premature closure of the institute left the task incomplete (Desnitskii, 1938, p. 71).<sup>12</sup>

### **Sociological Method and Sociological Poetics**

The project on sociological poetics was initially led by Shishmarev, and had the task of ‘working out and establishing a sociological basis for the concepts that are operative in poetics (form, genre, plot etc.)’.<sup>13</sup> In assembling a group of young scholars for this project, Desnitskii brought to ILIaZV a number of his younger acquaintances from the Herzen Institute, where he had played a formative role and served as Dean of the philology faculty. These included the art scholar Ieremiia Ioffe and the literary scholar Valentin Voloshinov. In 1927 he added Pavel Medvedev, who took on a leading role in the project, when he became a senior research fellow at the institute.<sup>14</sup> Already in 1925-26, when he was a junior researcher at the institute, Voloshinov was preparing a book *Opyt sotsiologicheskoi poetiki* (An Essay in Sociological Poetics) and he presented a plan of this book for consideration by the leaders of the section.<sup>15</sup> Here Voloshinov focused precisely on the same shortcomings that Desnitskii highlighted: the separation of theoretical and historical disciplines leading to a

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that decades later the Soviet structuralist Iurii Lotman noted that Desnitskii’s work was clearly superior to that of the sociological studies of literature of his day (Lotman 2010, pp. 31-33). I am indebted to Igor Pil’shikov for drawing my attention to this passage.

<sup>13</sup> PF ARAN 827/3/93/176

<sup>14</sup> RGALI (SPb) 288/1/39/7ob; 41; 76; 92.

<sup>15</sup> This was published as a supplement to Brandist 2008, pp. 190-95.

methodological pluralism that could be found in psychological and linguistic orientations in poetics as well as a general cultural-historical method developed by ‘epigones of Veselovskii’ (Brandist 2008, p. 190). Voloshinov argues these approaches need to be integrated into a properly sociological method, but the sociological method developed hitherto, particularly evident in the work of Pavel Sakulin, was not up to this task (Brandist 2008, p. 190). Voloshinov and Medvedev each developed critiques of Sakulin’s 1925 book *Sotsiologicheskii metod v literaturovedenii* (The Sociological Method in Literary Studies) in articles published in the journal *Zvezda* in 1926 (Medvedev, 1926; Voloshinov, 1926). Sakulin was a talented literary historian and an erudite reader of German literary scholarship, which he introduced to a Russian readership in his works. In his 1925 book *The Synthetic Construction of the History of Literature* (*Sinteticheskoe postroenie istorii literatury*) Sakulin provided detailed considerations of the work of scholars such as Oskar Walzel, Herman Nohl, Wilhelm Dibelius and Paul Merker, who pioneered studies of the relationship between the history of literary form and of social worldview (Sakulin 1925). In this work Sakulin played a role similar to that of Zhirmunskii in Leningrad, who edited translations of the work of German literary scholars and presented them as a counterweight to the work of Russian Formalists.<sup>16</sup> Sakulin argued that a ‘synthetic’ sociological method must meet three criteria: ‘1) Grasp literature in all the complexity of its constituent elements; 2) consequently lead to a definite unity of methodological principles and 3) provide an organic-unified picture of the whole process of literary development’ (Sakulin 1925, p.8). However, Sakulin proved unable to transcend a conspicuously dualistic methodology, since he separated ‘immanent’ and ‘causal’ factors in literature, regarding formal and stylistic analysis a precursor to analysis of the social factors that acted on literature from without. To overcome this dualism was one of the most important aims of the project to develop a sociological poetics within the literary section of ILIaZV, and as the Moscow school became more influential, the work of Kogan and Pereverzev were subjected to particular criticism within ILIaZV.<sup>17</sup>

### **Sociology of Style**

One of the first extended products of the project to appear in print was Ioffe’s 1927 book *Culture and Style* (*Kul’tura i stil*), which was the product of the sub-project on the sociology

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<sup>16</sup> For an overview see Dmitriev 2001.

<sup>17</sup> This resulted in the rather polemical 1930 collection *V bor’be za marksizm v literaturnoi nauke*, edited by Desnitskii, N. Iakovlev and L. Tsirlin, which included works by Desnitskii, Voloshinov and Kholodovich. The collection perhaps marks the end of the methodological advance of the section.

of style. Art, for Ioffe, is to be understood principally as a form of social thinking, a function of social and cultural activity. Where Shklovskii had famously written about art as device (*iskusstvo kak priem*), Ioffe argued art is a system of devices employed for the needs of communication. Form and content are not separate, but two aspects of a monad that can be separated only in the abstract. As Mazaev (2004, pp. 196-197) summarises the argument: form is one of the aspects of content, while its other aspect is revealed in the dynamics of the conceiving form: this is theme (idea, task, mental set (*ustanovka*)). Theme is realised by means of a series of devices in the specific material. Rather than form and content it would be more accurate to speak of ‘contentual’ form or formed content. Art is now conceived as a unity of form and content, and at the same time a system of devices for the needs of social intercourse. The social is thus the very fabric of the aesthetic object, and style becomes a manifestation of social thinking.

Ioffe’s version of a synthetic approach to art lies in an attempt to approach various media such as music, painting and literature as aspects of a unitary intellectual or stylistic whole. The baroque, impressionism, classicism and the like are now understood as manifestations of the rule-bound history of art as one aspect of the rule-bound history of thinking. Such an approach certainly invited the development of a rather mechanical correlation of styles with historical periods and intellectual movements. However Ioffe viewed art as a cultural phenomenon that at one time combined various layers and currents from different historical periods. Survivals of earlier stages were deposited in a given work or a style as ways of life that had been reworked or modernised. It also allowed Ioffe to make connections between philosophical orientations and the forms of figurative language. Thus, Ioffe argued, ‘we replace the uniplanar perspective on the past, horizontal history, with a multi-planar cultural process, the vertical contemporaneity’ (Ioffe 1927, p. 40).

Ioffe here was drawing on a number of ideas from German art scholarship including Heinrich Wölfflin’s ‘history of art without names’, which was widely received by early Soviet scholars, and Max Dvořák’s (1924) *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte* (The History of Art as the History of Spirit).<sup>18</sup> The latter’s general overall programme was defined thus: ‘Art does not consist merely in the solution of formal tasks and problems; it is also always, and in the first place, an expression of ideas which govern mankind, of their history as well as of the history of religion, philosophy, and poetry; it is part of the general history of the human

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<sup>18</sup> Dvořák’s book was translated into English as Dvořák 1984.

spirit' (quoted in Schiff, 1988, p. 1). As Ioffe's student, the philosopher Moisei Kagan (not to be confused with the unrelated Bakhtin Circle philosopher Matvei Kagan), noted, while following Dvořak's general scheme, Ioffe substituted 'spirit' with 'ideology', and shifted Dvořak's psychologistic notion of thinking to a sociologised conception (Kagan 2006, p. 38). Here Ioffe followed the same shift from psychologism to sociology that was taking place among linguists at the institute at this time (see Brandist, 2006b).

### **Comparative Studies of Plot (sravnitel'naia siuzhetologija)**

One of the things that allowed Ioffe to move beyond his German sources was his utilization of certain ideas from 'semantic palaeontology', a trend that had been developed from the ideas of Veselovskii and others by Marr. The unitary process of human thinking and art history now paralleled Marr's 'single glottogonic process' according to which all semantic material developed through distinct stages correlated to shifts in the relations of production in given societies. In the realm of the study of narratives these perspectives were to find a greater level of theoretical sophistication in the work of Izrail' Frank-Kamenetskii and Ol'ga Freidenberg, who were engaged in a sub-project on comparative study of plots at the institute. This was conceived as a development of Veselovskii's 'poetics of plots' (poetika siuzhetov, 1897-1906), which was published as part of his Historical Poetics in 1940 (Veselovskii 2004, pp. 493-596). The project aimed 'to place the traditional comparative study of plots on the soil of primordial, ancient and medieval sociality: the reason behind the migration of plots lies in the convergence of the social structures of those peoples from which and with which they are transferred; alongside this an independent birth of plots on the basis of convergent social conditions of life is also possible. In the most ancient periods the group works in connection with [Nikolai Marr's] Japhetic Theory'.<sup>19</sup>

Frank-Kamenetskii, who had studied with a range of important philosophers, philologists and orientalists in Germany before the war, was particularly important in bringing together Marr's semantic palaeontology, Ludwig Noiré's work on the relationship between language and labour and the Cassirer's discussion of the symbol in his magnum opus, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923-29).<sup>20</sup> Veselovskii's ideas about the rise of poetry from myth was

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<sup>19</sup> RGALI (SPb) 288/1/27/11ob.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview see Brandist 2011.

now placed on new philosophical basis with stages in the rationalisation of myth corresponding to shifts in forms of social thought and modalities of labour.

All this was, however, various expressions of a drive to rework and update Veselovskii's project of historical poetics according to contemporary philosophical principles. Zhirmunskii regarded his own 1924 doctoral dissertation, *Byron and Pushkin*, which was published in the series of monographs of the literary section of ILIaZV, as a development of Veselovskii's historical method. Zhirmunskii particularly championed the translation and publication of the work of Oskar Walzel in Russia, and it was here that he first announced his departure from the Petrograd Formalists when he wrote a preface to a translation of Walzel's *On the Problem of Form in Poetry*, stating that he regarded the new methods of the German scholar 'especially important in order to protect our young science of theoretical and historical poetics from narrow dogmatism in scientific questions, in which very little is still to be finally resolved and much requires study and comprehensive consideration' (Zhirmunskii 1923, p. 23). He particularly valued Walzel's work on impressionism and expressionism in contemporary German literature and the way worldview motivated the inner-form of artistic works. Here content and form is transferred into *Gehalt* and *Gestalt*, translated into Russian as *soderzhanie* and *oblik*, and which corresponds to Ioffe's 'contentual' form or formed content. Zhirmunskii argued Walzel's German formalism stood as an important counterweight to the narrow perspective of the still immature Russian Formalism, and encouraged Russian scholars to engage with conceptions such as Georg Simmel's work on Rembrandt and Italian Renaissance painters as embodiments of different socio-historical worldviews.<sup>21</sup> Zhirmunskii visited Walzel in Germany and at the end of the decade he and Sakulin collaborated to bring Walzel to lecture in Leningrad and Moscow. Also discussed at ILIaZV were Levin Schücking's *Sociology of Literary Taste*, a translation of which Zhirmunskii edited in 1928 (Shiukking, 1928), and Gustave Lanson's work on literary history and sociology in which the notion that society has a causal effect on literary form is replaced by the contention that 'literature partakes of collective tastes, behaviours, and states of consciousness and in this sense contain their own public, whose moral traditions, turns of mind, aesthetic capabilities and habits of poetic form subtly influence the author's process of creation' (Rand 1995, p. 221). The relationship between literature and its audiences becomes dynamic, and shifts with transformations of the social fabric, while the work is an 'evolving

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<sup>21</sup> It is notable that Zhirmunskii had attended Simmel's lectures in Berlin in 1912-13 (Berkov and Levin 2001, p. 11).

social phenomenon, transformed, enriched, impoverished, or deformed by new generations of readers' (Rand 1995, p. 221). Contrasting Schücking's work both with the narrow ideologism of much Marxist criticism at the time and with the inadequacies of Boris Eikhenbaum's notion of 'literary milieu' ('literaturnyi byt'),<sup>22</sup> Zhirmunskii wrote that Schücking's 'circle of sociological interests are much wider, and the selection of objects of research are strictly defined by a considered and grounded methodological system; questions of the professional life of the writer ('literaturnyi byt'), from this point of view, is only one of the elements of the social life that, for Schücking, conditions the evolution of aesthetic taste among socially differentiated groups of readers' (Zhirmunskii 1928, p. 11).

By the late 1920s Desnitskii and Shishmarev presided over an extremely intense and intellectually vibrant group of researchers who were reworking Veselovskii's comparative literature according to the latest work in German and French literary theory and philosophical aesthetics. Collections of articles on contemporary literary theory were planned involving members of the literary section, but also linguists like Vasili Abaev, Iakubinskii and Ivan Meshchaninov. Linguistic and literary theory interacted, with literary scholars like Desnitskii's student Voloshinov and Eikhenbaum's student Viktor Gofman writing on the intersection between literary and linguistic scholarship. Planned publications at the end of the 1920s included a collection on Contemporary West-European Literary-Aesthetic Theories, with chapters on Cassirer, Walzel and others to be written by, among others, Frank-Kamenetskii, Freidenberg, Voloshinov, Mark Azadovskii and Aleksandr Kholodovich. A project on the Palaeontology and Sociology of the Epic included Freideberg, Frank-Kamenetskii, Shishmarev and Medvedev.<sup>23</sup>

### **The 'Bakhtin Circle'**

Given this environment it is hardly surprising that it is precisely here that there emerged two now famous books about sociological poetics and the sociological method in linguistic science: i.e. Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Voloshinov 1929) and co-organiser of the project on sociological poetics Medvedev's *Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (Medvedev 1928). Nor should it be any surprise that Medvedev's book was a significant step up in its intellectual qualities from most of his earlier work. These works

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<sup>22</sup> The conception related to the sociology and economics of literary production as it affected the production and consumption of literature. For a discussion see Any (1994 pp. 105-108).

<sup>23</sup> RGALI (SPb) 288/1/41.

were individual contributions to collective research projects driven by sharp discussions between scholars of significant abilities, including the most significant Leningrad Formalists. Medvedev made it clear that his own views generally corresponded to those of Veselovskii, Walzel, Lanson and Zhirmunskii and a synthesis of some of the main ideas of these figures is precisely what we find in the Formal Method (Medvedev 1992, p. 92).

Among other things, the material presented here fundamentally problematizes the common tendency to privilege Bakhtin's influence on both Medvedev's and Voloshinov's books, and indeed, to view them primarily as products of the 'Bakhtin Circle'. In reality the documentary evidence we have suggests that they need to be considered as products of collective research projects at ILIaZV. This is not to dispute that ideas emerging in discussions at meetings of the 'Bakhtin Circle' may well have played a significant role in the key works of Voloshinov and Medvedev, but influence undoubtedly flowed both ways, especially given that Voloshinov and Medvedev managed to help Bakhtin to publish his 1929 book *Problems of Dostoevskii's Art* (*Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo*) in the ILIaZV series on sociological poetics. As a counterweight to unsupported claims to Bakhtin's authorship of Medvedev's book one might cite Desnitskii's claim, in a letter in support of the arrested Medvedev, that the Formal Method was carried out and completed with the use of his suggestions and advice (Medvedev 1992, p. 94). Indeed, the programmatic part of *The Formal Method* argues for a sociological poetics and literary history mediated by a historical poetics modelled on Veselovskii's *History of the Epithet* (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978 [Medvedev 1928] pp. 30-31). This follows Desnitskii's projected role for Veselovskii's work in Marxist literary scholarship closely. All those who wrote about Desnitskii's institutional role in the 1920s are agreed that his importance and influence goes well beyond his writings, which poorly represent the breadth and depth of his thought, and that his influence on his colleagues was very significant indeed. One of his students notes 'he did not so much read a lecture as share his thoughts with us... he did not like to explain his thoughts... one needed to grasp them in flight... he demanded our thoughts, and he loved it when we argued with him' (Smirnov 2007, p. 71). One of his other students, Aleksandr Ivanovich Gruzdev, who became a literary scholar in his own right, noted that 'without any exaggeration one can say that the ideas that Desnitskii uttered orally served as the basis of many books and much research, were employed by other people, historians of literature and critics, graduate students and refined scholars' (Gruzdev 1971, p. 71). It is quite reasonable to assume Voloshinov and Medvedev both benefitted from their discussions with Desnitskii, and through them so may

have Bakhtin. My point here is merely to foreground the importance of dialogue within institutional frameworks here rather than abstract individuals from their conditions that made their work possible.

As the decade finished these conditions ceased to support the development of theoretically sophisticated and flexible attempts to formulate a sociological poetics. Such fields of methodology were severely compromised by the incursion of statutory authority over scientific authority. However, one area that remained relatively unaffected by virtue of its distance from contemporary policy decisions was the long dureé perspectives of semantic palaeontology and of literary history in general (see Tihanov 2012a and 2012b). Other collective themes included ‘the theory and comparative study of the rise of the West-European epic’ directed by Shishmarev and ‘the comparative morphology of the German and English novel of 18-19th centuries’ directed by Zhirmunskii.<sup>24</sup> While the fundamental shift in the political and institutional framework at the end of the decade brought the work carried out at ILIaZV to a halt, we can still see its legacy in the later work of Ioffe, Zhirmunskii, Frank-Kamenetskii and Freidenberg. Removed from the extremely productive scholarly environment, and their work subjected to considerable criticism at the 1930s began, Voloshinov and Medvedev were never able to produce work to equal that which they had pioneered at ILIaZV. They did, however, bring this experience into the discussions of the informal group that would later be known as the Bakhtin Circle. Philosophically erudite and detached from institutional projects through recurrent illness, Mikhail Bakhtin would benefit enormously from the ideas his friends brought into group discussions. While he had undoubtedly provided important philosophical guidance to help underpin his friends’ work at ILIaZV, Bakhtin’s own work was transformed fundamentally by engagement with the ideas his friends brought from their work on sociological poetics. The first product of this transformation was *Problems of Dostoevskii’s Art* (*Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo*) published in the ILIaZV series in 1929, in which his early phenomenological reflections on authorship have been transformed into sociological and discursive terms. In subsequent years an entirely new historical dimension would come to light in Bakhtin’s essays on the novel of the 1930s, with the historical work of other scholars at ILIaZV playing an important role in the emergence of Bakhtin’s mature work on the novel. From here these conceptions continue, indirectly, to influence literary and cultural studies in many parts of the world today, but we

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<sup>24</sup> GARF A-4655/1/278/85

stand to miss out on a great deal if we do not engage with the wider intellectual sphere, for here we can find much of value that deserves dedicated research today.

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