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## **Formalism and New Criticism**

“The object of literary science, as the Formalists see it, is not literature but  
literariness.”

Boris Eikhenbaum

### **Introduction**

Formalism and New Criticism emerged in the early twentieth century as influential critical movements that transformed the study of literature. Both arose in response to the instability of meaning and the crisis of representation that characterized Modernism. While Modernist writers sought new forms to express the fragmented consciousness of modern life, Formalist and New Critical theorists developed methods of reading that emphasized the autonomy and internal coherence of the literary work. Their shared focus on form, structure, and language over historical or biographical context provided Modernist literature with a theoretical foundation that justified its stylistic innovations and aesthetic self-consciousness. Together, these movements reshaped literary criticism, aligning it closely with the Modernist belief in art’s capacity for self-sufficiency and formal order amid cultural disarray.

### **I. Russian Formalism: Form, Defamiliarization and the Autonomy of Art**

Russian Formalism, which flourished from approximately 1915 to the 1930s, was one of the first systematic approaches to literary theory. Scholars associated with this movement, such as Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Boris Eichenbaum, and Yuri Tynyanov, sought to establish literary study as an independent discipline with its own

methods and principles. They rejected the prevailing emphasis on authorial intention, psychology, and social context, arguing instead that literature should be analyzed as a self-contained system of linguistic and structural devices.

Central to Formalist theory was Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*, or defamiliarization, introduced in his seminal essay *Art as Technique* (1917). According to Shklovsky, the purpose of art is to make the familiar strange, to renew perception by disrupting habitual modes of seeing and thinking. This idea resonates profoundly with Modernist aesthetics: writers such as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf employed experimental language, fragmented structure, and non-linear narration to estrange the reader from conventional reality and to foreground the act of perception itself.

Formalists also emphasized the *literariness* of a text, the specific qualities that make it art rather than ordinary discourse. This focus on form and technique provided a theoretical framework for understanding Modernist experimentation. For instance, the fragmentation and allusiveness of Eliot's *The Waste Land* or the linguistic play in Joyce's *Ulysses* can be viewed as acts of defamiliarization that compel readers to engage with the text as a crafted aesthetic object. In this sense, Russian Formalism did not merely describe Modernist art; it offered a vocabulary for its justification, elevating form to the center of literary meaning.

## **II. New Criticism: The Text as an Autonomous Whole**

Developing independently but contemporaneously with Formalism, New Criticism arose in the Anglo-American world during the 1920s and 1930s, gaining prominence through critics such as I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and W. K. Wimsatt. Like the Russian Formalists, the New Critics rejected biographical, historical, and moral readings of literature in favor of close textual analysis. They regarded the literary work as an organic unity, a self-contained structure in which every image, symbol, and paradox contributes to the whole.

T. S. Eliot's essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919) laid much of the groundwork for this method by emphasizing the impersonality of art. For Eliot, the poet's task is to transcend personal emotion through a disciplined attention to form

and tradition. This principle directly anticipated the New Critical insistence on objectivity and the autonomy of the text. Later theorists such as Wimsatt and Beardsley codified this approach in essays like *The Intentional Fallacy* (1946) and *The Affective Fallacy* (1949), which argued that the meaning of a poem resides not in the author's intention or the reader's response but in the text's internal structure and language.

Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) epitomized the New Critical practice of "close reading," demonstrating how irony, tension, and paradox function to create aesthetic coherence. This method aligned seamlessly with Modernist literature's formal complexity and self-referential nature. The New Critics' emphasis on unity and precision mirrored the Modernist pursuit of order within chaos, while their attention to ambiguity and irony reflected the same skepticism toward absolute meaning that defines Modernist art.

## **Conclusion**

Formalism and New Criticism profoundly shaped both the theory and practice of Modernist literature. By privileging form, language, and the autonomy of the text, these movements provided the critical vocabulary through which Modernist innovation could be understood and appreciated. The Formalist idea of defamiliarization echoed the Modernist ambition to make art a site of renewed perception, while the New Critical focus on unity and paradox mirrored the Modernist quest for coherence amid fragmentation. Together, they transformed literary criticism into a rigorous discipline and reinforced the Modernist conviction that art must stand apart from the chaos of modern life as a self-sustaining order of meaning. In affirming the independence of the text and the primacy of form, Formalism and New Criticism not only explained Modernism—they helped define it.