Review: Formalism and Discourse Theory
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Formalism and Discourse Theory


John Frow ends this book with a gesture toward a radical reconceptualization of literary studies—“a call for the self-abolition of poetics and its transformation into a general rhetoric” (235). Arguing that there can be “no normative regulation of an aesthetically (or politically or morally) ‘correct’ mode of reading and theorizing,” Frow urges critics to focus instead on the “over-determination of discourse by power.” A criticism justified only by the goal of “producing an exact knowledge of textual formations,” he writes, is a sort of positivism which is necessarily limited to a reproduction of existing “academic practices of knowing [or] practices of closure.” In contrast, he advocates a critical practice that consistently questions existing institutional structures and the extent to which it reproduces or transforms them; a practice which can “generate a textual politics (a political positioning of texts)” (233–34).

Frow arrives at this position by combining two somewhat contradictory methodologies: (post)modern discourse theory as it has been developed in the works of Bakhtin, Halliday, Foucault, and Pecheux, and Russian Formalism/Prague Structuralism, including the theories of Tynjanov, Sklovskij, Mukarovsky and Jakobson. In effect, he reconstructs Formalism as a sort of refined, highly specific branch of discourse theory capable of analyzing the particular complexity of literary texts. As Frow demonstrates, the methods of close, careful analysis of literary texts practiced by Formalists can be extended productively to the analysis of larger textual systems/discourses. Yet, at several points (especially in chapters four and five on Formalism and its relation to literary history), his incorporation of Formalism into discourse theory carries with it a reification of the “literary” which inevitably would prevent the “self-abolition of poetics” and the transformation of literary studies.

Frow clearly sees literary effects as institutionally produced (rather than immanent in literary texts) most of the time. Drawing on discourse theory, he theorizes a concept of ideology in semiotic terms, in which “ideology is thought as a state of discourse rather than an inherent quality (a truth status or a particular thematic structure).” Categories such as “truth,” “representation,” and “subjectivity” are thought of as “effects” which are “functions rather than causes of discourse” (83). Literature, according to discourse theory, is not to be conceived as an essential category; it is a complex, historically specific, highly institutionalized discourse. Moreover, the effect of essentiality itself is discursively produced: “the concept of the relative autonomy of the literary system must be understood as the result of particular historical conditions and a particular articulation with other systems, not as an inherent quality of literary discourse” (84).

Nonetheless, when Frow turns from discourse theory to construct an overlapping genealogy of Formalism, a transcendent, essential notion of the “literary” surfaces in his writing. First, he lays the foundation for a conception of Formalism as consistent with discourse theory. The most important achievement of the Formalists, he observes, was to establish the unity of the conceptual level at which extraliterary values and functions become structural moments of a text, and at which, conversely, the “specifically literary” function acquires an extra-aesthetic dimension. Holding on to this principle is perhaps a
question of being sufficiently "formalist"—that is, of being willing to relate literary discourse to other discourse (to the structured order of the semiotic field) rather than to a reality which transcends discourse; to relate literary fictions to the universe of fictions rather than to a nonfictive universe. (99)

This characterization offers to rescue Formalism from the familiar charge of historical and political naivete. Formalism, it is suggested, contains the seeds of a theory of intertextuality, although it often lapses into a paradigm of realist reflectionism. But, as discourse theory assumes, and as Frow acknowledges on several occasions (e.g. 233), there is no "structural moment" which is purely literary and which can be opposed to "extra-literary values," and, conversely, there is no "specifically literary fiction" which can be opposed to an "extra-aesthetic dimension." Such terms are all relative effects of discourse, and not, as Frow sometimes seems to suggest, thresholds of essential literariness.

These transcendental concepts are reiterated when Frow lists the gains of his conflation of Formalism and discourse theory. Since his method gives "as much weight ... to formal linguistic and rhetorical structures and to positions of enunciation and reception as to thematic features," he states, it can attend to "all of the interrelated and overdetermined levels at which signification is constructed, although without assuming that textual structure is in itself ideologically significant" (my italics) (100). Thus, while Frow's appropriation of Formalism enables him to specify the levels at which the (discursive) category of the "literary" functions in relation to other texts, it results in what seems to be an essentialist definition of the "literary" and a privileging of the "literary" in exempting formal literary structures from ideological significance.

This combination of Formalism and discourse theory certainly would not have to produce a conception of literature as somehow essentially different from other forms of discourse. Indeed, Frow's exemplary readings are hedged with cautions against such privileging, and his arguments for a political criticism forcefully contradict it. Still, when he attempts to recuperate Formalism for discourse analysis, he consistently places literature on a plane above other forms of discourse. Literary discourse, is a sort of "metadiscourse," he writes, "which is continuous with and yet capable of a limited reflexive distance from the discourses it works (although the conditions of this working are themselves not external to power)" (100).

A key strength of discourse theory is that it enables the critic to treat literary discourse as one among a complex ensemble of discourses in a particular social formation. Thus, what Frow sees as the "metadiscursivity" of literature can be seen as an effect produced across several discourses. This is somewhat obscured, in this book, by the special function attributed to literary discourse. For political criticism, discourse theory enables the interrogation of the category of literature as a predominantly hegemonic discourse. Frow sometimes forfeits this advantage, and thereby weakens his theoretically sophisticated and (in general) rigorously argued intervention in the academic study of literature.

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