

8. Lyric & truth

Aurelia COJOCARU

The Modernist Method : Between Scientific and “Personal” Reason

Judhajit SARKAR

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Alexander ZHITENEV

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Aurelia Cojocaru (UC Berkeley, USA)

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The ways in which criticism has explained the relation between science and modernist writing—either by claiming the “influence” of particular scientific theories on particular authors, or by describing ‘experiments’ and procedures mimicking scientific research and technology—have often neglected the disciplinary, and often counter-disciplinary, singularity of lyric. A more nuanced historicization is imperative for our understanding of the relation of lyric to past and contemporary scientific practices. This paper traces the early twentieth century history of an omnipresent, yet under-examined term—namely, “method”—used by writers in three language traditions to signify the work of rational thought in poetry: T. S. Eliot, Paul Valéry and Andrei Bely.

In England, T.S. Eliot begins by critiquing the scientificity of the methods of anthropology. Starting around 1917, however, he employs the term “method” to describe a writer’s “design,” a structure which is not predetermined and yet carries the text forward (e.g., Pound’s “historical method”; Valéry’s “individual and new organisation of many poetic elements”; Joyce’s “mythical method”). Eliot’s use of “method” predates his more famous account of the “objective correlative” and the “impersonality” of the poet, and helps qualify the alleged scientific objectivity these concepts connote. He claims in his 1924 essay on Valéry, “no good poetry” is fully impersonal; “personal experience is extended and completed in something impersonal.” Thus method is not *separate* from individual experience, but is indeed continuous with it, in ways that have yet to be fully articulated by modernist scholarship.

Paul Valéry’s own engagement with method derives from a lifelong admiration of Leonardo da Vinci and Descartes, models of a universal “power of the spirit” that can formulate hypotheses “which admit of variation but not of chance.” This functions as an ideal horizon for a Mallarméan poetics, which seeks to overcome the arbitrariness of language by placing it alongside an opposing horizon of music. I argue, however, that when Valéry describes the poet as an “almost algebraist,” he means the “almost” as an essential *limit*. I show the poet’s gradual articulation of the risks of scientific determinism: from describing, in the late 1890s, modern Germany as a “methodical” state, to a gradual retraction of the term itself after World War I, precisely because of the

politically-driven destruction which had now become associated with the scientific method. The Russian poet Andrei Bely, in a similar spirit of transcending the limits of French symbolism, formulates what he calls the “symbol as method.” Claiming that all art is, in essence, symbolic, Bely recasts the symbol as a vehicle of knowledge, positing an originary union between literature, religion, science and philosophy. Geometrical representation, often interspersed with Bely’s writing, ties together these different levels of abstraction. Bely’s volume of poetry, *Urn* (1909), uses multi-dimensionality, I argue, as an allegorical adaptation of a historico-philosophical concept, anticipating the broader “method” of his experimental novel, *Petersburg* (1916).

Judhajit Sarkar (Heidelberg, D)

To Be and Not to Be Oneself : On the Lyrical Practice of Shakti Chattopadhyay

Shakti Chattopadhyay, largely unknown to Western readers and to the world of Western literary criticism, was one of the most prolific poets and verse-makers of modern Bengal. In a poetic career spanning roughly over four decades, Chattopadhyay bridged many chasms that had divided the literary world of not only Bangla but all other South Asian languages, which underwent the process of standardization under colonial modernity. With a vast repertoire of metaphors and images drawn from a variety of sources and an elastic, expansible vocabulary at his disposal, Chattopadhyay reconciled the elite and the popular, the romantic and the modernist, the Western and the indigenous, and the pastoral and the urban, thereby creating an oeuvre that does not sit comfortably with the analytical categories popularized by metropolitan “post”-colonial theory. In an attempt to go beyond the alleged intellectualism that characterized the advent of modernism in Bangla poetry, Chattopadhyay used the word *podyo* (verse) for his works instead of the more generally used *kavita* (Poetry), signaling not only a structural shift, but also a basic change in attitude towards the medium of expression itself. In this paper, I would be looking at Chattopadhyay’s poetics with the question, what it means to *be* in the poem, in view.

Alexander Zhitenev (Voronezh State U, RU)

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In the 20th century, the concept of the specifics of poetry was always associated with the assessment of the conventionality of the poetic language and various options for its overcoming. At the same time, the interrelation of “poetry” and “truth” was often explained by one or another variant of correlation of emotionality and imagination in the lyrics. I. Annenskiy, on the one hand, noted that to be a poet means “to invent oneself”, and on the other hand, he stressed that “instead of hyperboles with which feelings, often feigned ones, were conditionally conveyed in the old poetry, the new poetry is looking for exact symbols for the moods”. This contradiction of “genuineness” and “imaginaryness” can also be noted in other important texts on the Russian poetry of the 20th century. In this system of reasoning, “imaginaryness” often has opposite meanings: on the one hand, it is a burden of literary conventionality; on the other hand, it is an integral characteristic of any artistic work. The purpose of the report is to show how the “betweenness” of the lyric poetry is realized in the transition of different imagination concepts and different emotionality models in the Russian literature of the 20th century.