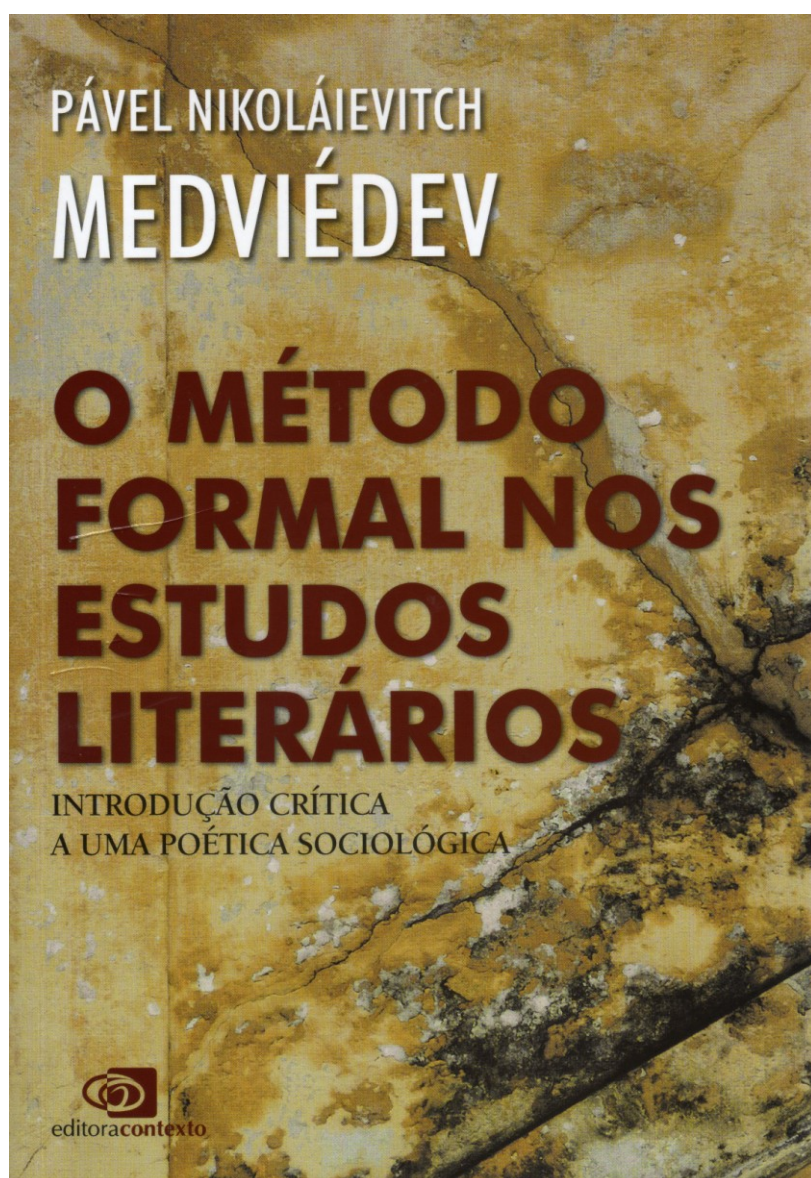


**MEDVIÉDEV, Pável Nikoláievitch. *O método formal nos estudos literários: introdução crítica a uma poética sociológica.* [The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics] Translated from Russian to Portuguese by Sheila Camargo Grillo and Ekaterina Vólkova Américo. São Paulo: Contexto, 2012, 269 p.**

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We have waited quite long for the translation into Portuguese of this extraordinary book written by Pável N. Medviédev. It is hard to explain why it has taken so long. Perhaps the prestige that Russian Formalism had in literary studies in Brazil in the 1970s and 80s and the persistence of a certain formalist substrate in subsequent decades have inhibited the will to translate a book that radically and consistently criticizes those theorists' thought.

But, whatever were the reasons for the delay, the wait has been fully compensated because the judicious and careful work of the two translators has given us a text of the highest quality. It has been a happy conjunction of skills: Ekaterina Vólkova Américo, a native speaker of Russian, teaches Russian at the University of São Paulo (USP), works as a translator and has recently got her Ph.D. in Russian Literature and Culture; Sheila Camargo Grillo is one of the most prominent scholars who deal with the ideas of the so-called Bakhtin Circle in Brazil. She is also a Professor at the University of São Paulo (USP) and has been a researcher at the Gorky Institute of World Literature (Moscow).

For their translation, they have used the original Russian text *Formálnyi miétod v literaturoviédanii: kritícheskoe vvediénie v sotsiologúitsheskuiu poétiku*, published in Leningrad in 1928. It is not, therefore, an indirect translation. In this sense, the translators give a valuable contribution to the Brazilian academic world.

They also inform the reader that they have collated their translation with the ones in English, Spanish, French and Italian, which – as Sheila C. Grillo says in her Preface – “allowed us in the moments of consonance as much as in those of dissonance, to delimit our choices, rendering them more conscious”(p. 21). Some of those choices are commented in a Translators' Note (p.39-40), in which they also clarify the criteria for transliteration. Finally, it is important to highlight the fact that the translators have inserted footnotes (N.T.) with information on authors and books cited in the text, rendering easier the reader's job.

The book just published by Editora Contexto contains a Presentation, written by Beth Brait; a Preface, signed by Sheila Camargo Grillo; a Biographical Note, written by Iuri P. Medviédev (the author's son), plus a list of the large bibliographical production of Pável N. Medviédev, with texts ranging from 1911 to 1937.

Beth Brait, in her Presentation, emphasizes the importance of the book in its own time as much as for today's readers. It is a work that responds to important theorists on

language “whose basic ideas are recovered and problematized from a new point of view on the subject” (p.14). Among the many issues addressed in the book, Beth Brait points out especially the sophisticated methodological and theoretical discussion that the author develops on speech genres.

In her Preface, Sheila C. Grillo presents the book and the translation, and analyzes the “thorny” issue of the authorship of the book. Personally, I consider this issue largely irrelevant. I acknowledge the authorship of the texts of the Bakhtin Circle by their signature. So, I have no doubt that Pável N. Medviédev is the author of this book. This procedure has been heuristically very productive because it facilitates the perception of the many similarities but also of the differences that exist among the various works of that “community of thinkers” (to use here the expression of Iuri P. Medviédev in the Biographical Note, p.249) who gathered together in the 1920s and, by the vicissitudes of the history of their reception, were grouped together under the label of the “Bakhtin Circle”.

However, as we all know, there exists a sort of an academic industry that lives by exploring the issue of the authorship and often and easily reaches the limits of scandal and nonsense. Sheila C. Grillo could not, therefore, escape from dealing with that matter. And she has done it exemplarily: she has sought information from multiple sources and has written a dispassionate exposition, i.e., ethically and academically responsible.

In the Biographical Note, Iuri P. Medviédev draws a portrait of his father which let us learn more about the life of an active intellectual deeply committed to his work in those fateful years in which Russian culture reached very high levels of effervescence and creativity, but was soon suffocated by the mediocre sameness imposed by the totalitarian terror. In that short period of time, we see that brilliant intellectual who left us an inspiring work on literary scholarship and who actively participated in the effervescence of his own time to be declared “enemy of the people” and be shot in 1938.

Coming now to P. N. Medviédev’s text, it is worth mentioning that it has four parts and nine chapters, plus a Conclusion. In Part One (*The Object and Tasks of Marxist Literary Scholarship*), we read the presentation of the fundamentals of what the author calls the “studies of ideologies”, i.e., a Marxian inspired theory of ideological

creation – taken the terms “ideologies” and “ideological” in their widest (and positive) sense, that is, as referring to what Marx used to call “the products of the human spirit” (or the universe of the superstructures) and not in the strict (and negative) sense of distortion of reality.

The sociological poetics proposed by Medviédev in Chapter Two of this Part One, is thus the theory of the “study of ideologies” that will deal specifically with literary creation.

After this general discussion, the author, in Part Two of the book (*A Contribution to the History of the Formal Method*) presents a historical review of Formalist thought on Art studies in Western Europe and then in Russia, outlining their main differences.

Part Three (*The Formal Method in Poetics*) is a detailed discussion of key concepts and assumptions of Russian Formalism: the author presents them, submits them to systematic critique and exposes his own ideas on each theme. We find here, in this methodological procedure, one of the characteristics of the “community of thinkers” to which Medviédev belonged: the author approaches the other critically, but first presents him in detail and respectfully. It is in this same way that Voloshinov, for example, discusses Freudism and Bakhtin discusses the critique on Dostoevsky.

Among the many topics discussed critically by Medviédev in Part Three it deserves special mention his long argument against one of the pillars of the Russian Formal Method: their concept of poetic language as opposed to practical language.

This argument is undoubtedly one of the highlights of the book. It shows that poeticity is not in the language itself, but stems from the process of appropriation of the linguistic element (whatever it is) by certain modes of poetic construction. In other words, “language acquires poetic characteristics only in the concrete poetic construction. These characteristics do not belong to the language in its linguistic capacity, but to the construction, whatever its form may be” (p.142).

Finally, Part Four (*The Formal Method in Literary History*) is a critical presentation of the way the Russian Formal Method treated the themes of the history of literature.

In the critical discussion of the Formalist theory of poetic language, Medviédev revisits the conception of language that he, Bakhtin and Voloshinov formulated in the

1920s. More than that: it is in this discussion that he also reinforces the basis of the general Aesthetics developed by that “community of thinkers”. It is precisely because of this that this book has to be read along with two texts signed by Bakhtin, "Author and hero in aesthetic activity" and "The problem of content, material and form in verbal art" (as I have already suggested in Faraco, 2009). It is this set of texts that explicitly presents the aesthetic theory of that “community of thinkers”.

The first observation that can be done about this aesthetic theory is that it is very much in tune with the aesthetic discussions commonly held in the early 20th century. Medviédev shows us, in Part Two of his book (p.87-127), that the theoretical discourse about Art – under the impact of the transformations that Art went through in the late 19th century and early 20th – began to assume the constructive character of Art over the conceptions of art as imitation, representation or expression. This historical situation brought the task for the scholars to reveal the structural unit of the work of Art and the purely constructive functions of each of its elements.

It is precisely in this direction that Bakhtinian discourse goes. In his text "Author and hero in aesthetic activity," Bakhtin (1990, p.9) criticizes the biographical and sociological approaches to Art. He says that they lack the aesthetic and formal understanding of the creative principle of the fundamental relationship of the author to the hero. His focus of attention is therefore clearly the aesthetic-formal.

In this sense, it comes close to formal, constructivist conceptions of Art that Medviédev summarizes in the first chapter of Part Two of his book – summary that concludes with the statement (p. 101) that the problem posed by these conceptions (i.e., the attention that they have aroused to the constructive character of aesthetic activity) and their fundamental trends toward its solution were generally acceptable to him and his peers. He adds, however, the remark: "What is not acceptable is the philosophical base upon which these solutions are proposed" (p.101).

In the course of the book, Medviédev discusses in detail that philosophical base he refers to critically. Bakhtin and his peers could not agree basically with the idea that the formal-aesthetic aspects necessarily exclude the social, historical and cultural aspects. That is, they could not agree with the idea that the social, historical, cultural aspects are foreign to what is specific to Art.

What is considered external by the formal method becomes, for Bakhtin and his peers, internal, immanent to the aesthetic object. And this is achieved by the ingenious way they conceive the fundamental constructive principle of aesthetic activity, i.e., the double refraction. Nothing enters Art directly (as if it was just a stenographic record). In the artistic act, the experienced reality (in itself already refracted, i.e., covered by different sociocultural valuations since social life always takes place in a complex axiological atmosphere) is transposed to another axiological plane (the plane of the work of Art) – the aesthetic act operates on value systems and creates new value systems.

It is precisely because of this that Medviédev resumes, insistently, in his book the argument in favor of a single sociological method to the study of Art and Literature in particular, as opposed to a tradition that assumes as necessary the separation of the immanent study of Art from the study of its history and its social and cultural insertion.

There would be in Art, according to this tradition, an absolute specificity, an aesthetic-in-itself (free of any interference of social, cultural and historical aspects) that should be the real object of attention and effective analysis. The study of Art history and its sociocultural insertion should not be mixed with the study of the specificity of Art, the aesthetic-in-itself.

This methodological perspective of a radical cut in aesthetic studies had already been criticized by Medviédev in the text he published in 1926, entitled "sociologism without sociology" (MEDVIÉDEV, 1983). In it, the author reminds us that P. N. Sakulin – the Russian theorist of Literature that tried, in the 1920s, to reconcile, in an encyclopedic work, traditional literary scholarship, poetic formalism and Marxism – defended two different methods for the study of Literature: the formal method for the study of the immanent and the sociological method for the historical and causal study of Art.

Medviédev writes an extensive critique of this dichotomous position (returning to this critique in this book) in which the methods have no internal connection, no systematic unity. And it is precisely this internal connection, this systematic unity that Medviédev and his peers in the Bakhtin Circle search for in their formulations on the theoretical and philosophical aesthetic activity: a unique method that does not ignore nor the specificity of Art, nor the fact that Art, as any product of the human spirit, is social from start to end.

It is, for its ingenuity, a beautiful general Aesthetics that has not properly reverberated (cf. discussion in FARACO, 2011). We hope the translation of Medviédev's book can motivate, among us, a renewal of such thought heuristically so powerful.

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