

A Contemporary Russian Structuralist

A review of Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form*, translated by Valentina Zavarin and Susan Wittig (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1973); XVIII + 181; \$ 9.00.

As the translators tell us, Boris Uspensky, born in 1937, is a young member of the Russian Structuralists and has been trained principally in linguistics. He has published *Principles of Structural Typology*, translated to English in 1968, and books in Russian on African languages, Old Church Slavic, stress in Russian canonic names, and common structural characteristics in different art forms. In addition, he has written articles — most of them in Russian but a few translated into Italian, French, and English — on linguistics, rhetoric, semiotics, iconography, myth, and literary structuralism. Uspensky became associated in 1962 with a group of young Moscow scholars in semiotics who were joined in 1964 by Yury Lotman from the University of Tartu in Estonia where the first of a series of summer symposia on structuralism was held in that year. *Semeiotika*, a journal published at Tartu, is the principal organ for these Russian Structuralists. To date, western scholars writing in English have taken very little notice of Uspensky's work although in French Tzvetan Todorov has dealt summarily with it in *Pbétique*, 9, as has Stefan Zolkiewski in *Semiotica*, 5.

Uspensky has returned the compliment, and *Poetics* is virtually free of reference to western scholarship on point of view, the real subject of this book, aside from two footnotes mentioning Käte Friedemann's *Die Rolle des Erzählers in der Epik* (1910), Norman Friedman's well-known article which appeared in *PMLA* in 1955, and Smidt's paper on point of view in Victorian poetry in a 1957 number of *English Studies*. It is as if the Moscow University library did not hold the important studies of Wayne Booth, Brooks and Warren, Käte Hamburger, Franz Stanzel, Jean Pouillon, and the French Structuralists, not to mention such pioneering works as those by Percy Lubbock and E. M. Forster. The translators could have provided a service by calling Uspensky's attention to these sources during the course of the rewriting for translation of the original 1970 edition. Unfortunately, as a result, *Poetics* may read too often to the English-speaking student like a development in different terms of Friedman's arguments or to the more initiated scholar like a digest of the early Russian Formalists like Bakhtin, Voloshinov, or Vinogradov, or even of Uspensky's colleague Yury Lotman, all of whose contributions Uspensky acknowledges. A certain lack of originality and of recognition of recent scholarship, then, are two defects of *Poetics*. Another is its occasional stylistic stiffness although this may be partly the fault of the translators. The opening pages of the concluding chapter (which the translators invite us to read first) provide a good example of the academic summing up and the needless repetition that sometimes mar this book. On the other hand *Poetics* has the strengths of its defects. Although derivative, it digests the important ideas of the Russian Formalists on point of view, ideas available for the most part only in Russian. Secondly, it develops and applies to Russian literature methods that in Friedman, for instance, remain principally theoretical and in others like Wayne Booth (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*) or Gérard Genette (*Figures III*) are demonstrated by reference to English or French fiction. Finally, some of the detailed analyses of fictional texts