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Exploring New Avenues Beyond Literary Historicism: A Cross-Temporal and Cross-Cultural Dialogue Between American Posthistoricism and Slavic Literary Theory

Abstract. This study works toward filling the Slavic blind spot in American literary posthistoricist discourse. Drawing upon Rita Felski's onslaught on historicist contextualism, Russell Berman's refutation of periodization in literary studies, and Wai Chee Dimock's manifesto for a diachronic (post)historicism, it argues that these paradigms have shown a high degree of territorial confinement and would do better to engage with Slavic theories on literature. Given the centrality of the act of reception in posthistoricist perspectives on literature, the article posits the reception-oriented theories of the Prague School of Literary Studies and the Polish School of Literary Communication as the representative Slavic voices for symbiotic transactions with American posthistoricism(s). The resonant interactions the study orchestrates between these literary-theoretical paradigms across a spatial and temporal chasm pave the way for an amplified riposte to the hegemony of various historicizing tendencies in contemporary literary scholarship. The article does not limit itself to the mere refutation of literary historicism but also outlines a few posthistoricist directions that future literary/cultural scholarship could take. These alternatives, pivoting around the figure of the lay reader, could lead to the proliferation of studies on the history

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of reading and the dynamics of canon formation while questioning the viability of academically mandated interpretations of literary/cultural texts driven by the historicizing imperative.

Keywords: literary posthistoricism, postcritique, reception theory, concretization, resonance, Jan Mukařovský, Michał Głowiński

1. Introducing Literary/Cultural Postcritique and its Opposition to the Historicizing Imperative

Over the past decade and a half, the figure of Rita Felski has become almost synonymous with postcritique—a call for a radical break with various suspicious modes of interpretation that have gained wide currency in literary and cultural studies. Working in parallel, and often in collaboration, with other like-minded (post)critics, including Elizabeth Anker, Heather Love, and Toril Moi, to name a few, Felski has undertaken the rather ambitious project of recalibrating the methodological foundations of her field. Central to the idea of postcritique is its challenge to the authority of a "hermeneutics of suspicion" in contemporary literary and cultural studies. The phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" derives from the book *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* by the French philosopher Paul Ricœur. In this book, Ricœur compares the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud to Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche and finds an underlying unifying characteristic in the *modus operandi* of the three intellectuals. According to Ricœur, "all three begin with [sic] suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering" recondite meanings beneath this illusion (34). Extending, or rather translating, this concept to the field of literary and cultural studies, Felski and her fellow proponents of postcritique employ the term "hermeneutics of suspicion" as a general rubric, subsuming under it a diverse array of contemporary literary theoretical paradigms that have come to be known as "critique."

The disagreement between critique and postcritique is as much a matter of mood as methodology. The affective stance of critique has been subjected to interrogation across diverse strands of postcritical practice. In an article titled "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," the queer theorist and pioneer of postcritique, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, excoriates a vast majority of critical reading practices as fundamentally paranoid insofar as they single-mindedly seek to ward off anticipated humiliation from an imagined enemy (136). Elsewhere, Bruno Latour, in his well-known essay "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam," resorts to psychological typology to describe scholars invested in critique as "mad scientists who have let the virus of critique out of the confines of their laboratories and cannot do anything now to limit its deleterious effects" (231). Notwithstanding Latour's obvious concerns about the consequences of critique being co-opted by right-wing forces, one cannot fail to notice his condemnation of the critical mood, which he describes in patently psychopathological terms. Similar characterological terms also abound in Felski's recent works, in which she compares the suspicious critic to an endless array of professionals, including doctors, scientists, archaeologists, and sleuths, to name a few. The

common thread that runs through all these seemingly arbitrary characterizations of critique is a pessimistic and relentlessly vigilant mood that seeks to plumb the depths of texts to unmask "unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see" (Felski, *The Limits* 1). Despite this emphasis on the affective stances of literary critical practices that one is bound to encounter frequently in postcritique, its proponents have not entirely brushed aside methodological issues.

In response to the methodological dogmatism of critique in literary and cultural studies, proponents of postcritique have called for an anti-elitist recalibration of the field that moves beyond the academically trained reader's suspicious readings of texts to embrace a wide range of affective and interpretive possibilities. In a thought-provoking article on postcritique and its positioning of extra-institutional reading, Tobias Skiveren points out that many of the methodological innovations proposed by postcritique are founded on "a growing dissatisfaction with this [sic] long-standing tradition of dismissing the lay reader" (165). While critique strives to distinguish professional interpretation from amateur reading, postcritical scholars have taken upon themselves the seemingly paradoxical task of finding ways to simultaneously "account for the practices of professional as well as nonprofessional readers" (170). Given how lay reading practices are anathema to most professionally mandated critical reading methods, Skiveren remains skeptical of the viability of a project seeking to reconcile the two. Indeed, Felski and her fellow adherents of postcritique have yet to come up with a robust, coherent, and unequivocally postcritical reading practice. All the same, their works have yielded a rich assortment of methodological signposts for future researchers committed to eschewing critique-inflected modes of literary and cultural analysis.

Rita Felski's forceful polemic against the pervasiveness of a suspicious mood within critique-based modes of inquiry has tended to obscure her methodological objections to the fetishization of context in contemporary literary and cultural studies. In a paper titled "Context Stinks," published in *New Literary History* in 2011, Felski takes umbrage at critical historicism, which, she argues, is predicated on the assumption that historical context is a hermetically sealed entity (often called a *period*) within which individual texts are enclosed. From such a vantage point, texts are interesting to the literary and cultural studies scholar only insofar as they relate to contemporaneous economic, political, and socio-cultural factors operating during their production. Felski's line of thought can be mapped to Russell A. Berman's observation that the "assertion of a periodic frame around multiple phenomena implies that their contemporaneity is itself of defining importance to their understanding" (320). It is this notion of contemporaneity, so dear to historicist contextualism, that has come under attack by literary and cultural theorists inclined towards postcritique. Felski argues that rigorous contextualism fails to do justice to the aesthetic dimension of texts, by virtue of which they form vast spatiotemporal networks across conventional historical and socio-cultural demarcations. In "Context Stinks," which was later modified and republished as a chapter in *The Limits of Critique*, Felski shows how her refutation of mainstream critical historicism is closely bound up with her larger postcritical agenda. She claims that one of the myriad ways a hermeneutics of suspicion manifests

itself is through an unquestioning reverence for the contemporaneous contextual forces that "shape and sustain" the literary text ("Context Stinks" 574). The critic who reads with an eye for such forces invariably ignores the agency of the text, subserviating it to a series of hidden social conditions of production waiting to be unearthed by a suspicious reader.

2. Setting up a Dialogue Between American Posthistoricism and Slavic Reception Study

Critical contextualism in its myriad forms has always been frowned upon by literary scholars committed to aestheticist or formalist standpoints. Felski's postcritical stance against contextualist readings, however, does not subscribe to either extreme of the aestheticism-historicism spectrum. Her quest to do justice to both the singularity and the worldliness of texts is part of a larger posthistoricist dissent against mainstream critical historicism from a non-formalist and non-aestheticist standpoint. One of the most oft-quoted theorists from this rich plethora of posthistoricist voices is Walter Benjamin, who, as Jeffrey Insko points out, "has become something of a touchstone for scholars interested in alternate modes of literary history" (119). In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin critiques the German historian Leopold von Ranke's injunction that the historian's task is to objectively reconstruct the past "as it really was" by isolating it from the rest of history (247). Benjamin laments the lack of empathy that the present displays towards the past in such conservative variants of historicism. However, Benjamin's objections seem to be directed primarily towards teleological visions of historiography that subscribe to rather puerile notions of "progress" (249–250). From a Benjaminian posthistoricist perspective, any articulation of history with a sense of *telos* tends to picture time rather naively as a straight arrow, disregarding its propensity to run in loops or trace out complex non-linear trajectories. In many ways, Rita Felski is a Benjaminian figure in her discipline. Felski objects to a (Rankean) "historicism that treats works of art only as cultural symptoms of their own moment, as moribund matter buried in the past" ("Context Stinks" 575). Her anti-teleological stance, too, shines forth in her commitment to conceive of "temporal interdependency without telos" and "movement without supersession" (578). Having thus distanced itself from the epistemology of literary historicism, Felski's version of literary posthistoricism demands its distinctive conceptual footholds.

A term that Felski invokes in her manifesto for a literary posthistoricism is "resonance"—an aural metaphor that is more commonly associated with the natural sciences. In acoustics, vibrating systems possess specific frequencies called resonant frequencies at which they enter into mutually reinforcing co-oscillations with other systems vibrating at any of these designated frequencies. Rainer Mühlhoff notes that resonance is "a very specific and selective case of interaction" that produces the maximal induced vibration in each participating system (191). The key takeaways from this succinct but reductive attempt at defining resonance are its *selectivity, mutuality*, and *amplificatory power*. These defining characteristics of resonance are also featured predominantly in Wai Chee Dimock's seminal enunciation of the concept as

a literary-theoretical metaphor in a 1997 article titled "A Theory of Resonance." Notably, the same article also provides much of the theoretical basis for Felski's onslaught on critical historicism. The concerns of Dimock and Felski unite in their objections to a "synchronic historicism" that refuses to extend "the hermeneutical horizon of the text ... beyond the moment of composition" (Dimock 1061). Synchronic historicism entails slice-of-time periodizations that form the contextual backdrop against which literary or cultural texts are interpreted. Both Dimock and Felski argue that synchronic historicism's fixation with the context of production must make way for a diachronic historicism that views texts as "objects that do a lot of traveling: across space and especially across time" (1061). During these transcultural and transtemporal movements, they "run into new semantic networks [or] new ways of imputing meaning" (Felski, "Context Stinks" 580). Considering the extent to which this opposition to synchronic historicism threatens to subvert the historicist enterprise, both Felski and Dimock's project might as well be relabeled as a "diachronic posthistoricism."

It does not require a great stretch of imagination to grasp the connection between a diachronic posthistoricism and the idea of resonance, predicated as they are on the idea of textual mobility. As texts move across space and time, tunneling across synchronic contextual barriers, they interact with diverse semantic networks. In *specific* instances, texts *match frequencies* with the semantic network in which they are received, causing an *amplified* response—a phenomenon that could be regarded as the cultural analog of acoustic resonance. It is precisely this phenomenon that Dimock describes as "traveling frequencies of literary texts ... causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places" (1061). Reception, therefore, invariably plays a pivotal role in the transtemporal movements of literary texts. Wai Chee Dimock stresses the importance of paying attention to "changes in the registers of reception" when texts travel across space and, more crucially, across time (1061). Russell Berman, too, contends that the very act of historicist periodization "suppresses the experience of reception" (328). A transtemporal perspective that does away with strictly delimited "slice of time" historical contexts is better equipped to engage with the reader's experiences, not just those of the professionally trained critic but also the lay reader. Readers, particularly those without academic affiliations, also lie at the heart of Rita Felsi's outline for a posthistoricist and postcritical study of literature. Felski stresses the importance of paying attention to what the text "makes possible in the viewer or reader—what kind of emotions it elicits, what perceptual changes it triggers, what affective bonds it calls into being" ("Context Stinks" 585). Considering the centrality of the reader's experience to posthistoricist discourses in literature, the scant references to theories of reader-response and reception in the works of Feksi, Dimock, Berman, and other like-minded thinkers is a glaring void. This void is particularly conspicuous in the works of Felski and her fellow advocates of postcritique, who have elsewhere engaged in a sustained polemic against other dominant paradigms of contemporary literary theory.

To date, the encounter between postcritique and reception study has been tangential at best. Rita Felski's book *Uses of Literature* includes a passing reference to the phenomenologically

oriented models of reader-response developed by Wolfgang Iser and Roman Ingarden. While Felski endorses Iser and Ingarden's emphasis on the interactive nature of reading, she takes umbrage at them for their formalist leanings, which, in her opinion, renders their "imagined readers ... curiously bloodless and disembodied, stripped of all passions as well as of ethical or political commitments" (*Uses of Literature* 16). Closer to the discussion at hand, in "Context Stinks," Felski singles out for postcritical scrutiny two contextualist models of reception—Tony Bennett's "reading formations" and Stanley Fish's "interpretive communities." According to Felski, both models are methodologically suspect because they subordinate text to context by assuming that texts possess "no independent existence, no distinctive properties, no force, or presence of their own" ("Context Stinks" 586). The obvious superficiality of these arguments notwithstanding, it is worth noting that here, as in the rest of her works, Felski seldom wanders beyond the territorial expanse of America and Western Europe in her survey of paradigms of literary scholarship. Barring the perfunctory reference to Ingarden, Felski elides the rich tradition of reception study in Czech and Polish literary scholarship. One also searches in vain for a Slavic presence in Dimock's articulation of a diachronic (post)historicism, Berman's refutation of historicist periodization, or, for that matter, in the entirety of posthistoricist discourses produced within the territorial confines of America. This omission might not come across as too surprising after all, considering the more generalized blind spot for Central and Eastern European ideas in Western European and Anglo-American literary circles (Mrugalski et al. 4). This paper seeks to set up a cultural intercrossing between two such literary-theoretical paradigms which have never crossed paths - American posthistoricism and Slavic reception study. While Rita Felski, Wai Chee Dimock, and Russell A. Berman will contribute to the American posthistoricist voice, the Slavic perspective will be represented primarily by the reception-oriented theories of Jan Mukařovský', Felix Vodička, and Michał Głowiński.

On a parenthetical note, it must be acknowledged that the territorial epithets "American" and "Slavic" might seem to impose unduly restrictive spatial boundaries on a study committed to challenging a text's temporal boundaries of analysis. Such labels might also risk reintroducing the fallacious concept of stable national frames of reference into a framework of discursive entanglements. Nevertheless, the epithets mentioned above have been employed to emphasize the tendency towards territorial confinement exhibited by the literary-theoretical discourses being examined—a realization that will hopefully serve as a springboard for cross-cultural encounters such as the one carried out in this study. In other words, the labels "American" and "Slavic" will work toward their own dissolution within a more culturally entangled formulation of posthistoricism. In the process of this cross-cultural exchange, this study will also draw upon Dimock and Felski's articulations of resonance and transtemporal affinity to shape its methodological direction. For instance, it will shed light on the potential for resonance between aspects of Slavic literary theory and contemporary American articulations of posthistoricism. The analysis will also consciously try to avoid veering into the same teleological modes of historicism it sets out to refute. Instead of imbuing posthistoricism with a sense of telos, it will be guided by

the Benjaminian view of history as repetition. Nothing agrees with this study's stance towards history and temporality better than Dominick LaCapra's assertion that the "basic problems in the humanities are repeated (and repeatedly thought about) with variations over time, and temporality itself from a humanistic perspective is arguably this very process of repetition with variation or change" (156). From this perspective, posthistoricism is not an emphatic and incontrovertible victory over historicism; it has to repeatedly wrest the literary text from the clutches of a resilient and mutating historicism. Such a temporality paves the way for an appraisal of the potential for resonance between two apparently strange bedfellows—postcritique and Prague structuralist aesthetics.

3. Amplifying Jan Mukařovský's Inchoate Posthistoricism through Transtemporal Resonance

The incipient posthistoricism in the works of the Czech aesthetician and literary theorist Jan Mukařovský has almost entirely evaded scholarly attention in Anglophone literary studies. Mukařovský was a part of the core group of the Prague Circle of linguists and literary scholars—a group that also included his compatriots René Wellek and Bohuslav Havránek, and the eminent Russian expatriates Roman Jakobson and Nikolay Trubetskoy, among others. Invoking Mukařovsky in a postcritical study on literary posthistoricism might seem far-fetched, as few scholars could be further from a postcritical practice than someone who described his corpus of literary-critical and aesthetic studies as a "structural aesthetics." Adherents of postcritique tend to dismiss structuralist literary scholars as quintessentially suspicious readers who, in Felski's words, engage in "a single-minded digging for buried truths" (*The Limits* 33). However, the analogy between the structuralist literary scholar and the indefatigable archaeologist would be more appropriate to French structuralist practice than its Prague School namesake. Unlike the former's substantial, if not total, commitment to the purely synchronic (Saussurean) task of disclosing the *narrative langue* that undergirds multiple *narrative paroles*, the latter seeks a more dynamic integration of the synchronic and diachronic axes of analysis (Galan 8). In other words, Prague structuralism merges the synchronically inclined concept of *system* with the diachronically inclined concept of *evolution*. The Prague School agenda is nicely summed up by Roman Jakobson and Jurij Tynjanov's thesis that "every system necessarily exists as an evolution, whereas, on the other hand, evolution is inescapably of a systemic nature" (48). The element of diachronicity in Prague structuralism orients it to engage with questions of literary history—an area of scholarly interest occupying a somewhat peripheral position within French structuralism.

As argued in this article, literary scholarship seeking to trace the transtemporal routes taken by literary or cultural texts can ill afford to ignore the diverse registers of receptive possibilities of these texts. In the Jakobson-Tynjanovian view of literary history mentioned above, the literary work remains "a free-floating abstraction ... cut loose from the producers as well as receivers" (Galan 142). It was Mukařovský's enunciation of the semiotic conception of a work of art that

was instrumental in foregrounding the role of the reader in the Prague Circle's literary aesthetic discourse. Drawing upon the Saussurean idea of the split sign, Mukařovský distinguishes between the material substratum of the work of art, which is analogous to the linguistic signifier, and the immaterial "aesthetic object" that embeds itself in the collective consciousness upon reception, which is roughly parallel to the signified (*Structure, Sign, and Function* 85). This notion of the work of art as a sign marks a significant albeit inhibited movement towards a reception-oriented literary analysis, although the reader (or the perceiver) remains subsumed under a somewhat vague category of *collective consciousness*. The intersection of literary history with reception aesthetics could, as indicated previously, prove to be a rather propitious combination for addressing questions of transtemporality in the study of literature. Interestingly, skipping forward more than half a century, the same concerns permeate Rita Felski and Wai Chee Dimock's rhetoric on diachronic (post)historicism. When placed in conversation with each other, these discursive paradigms, despite their separation in space and time, show a remarkable capacity for synergistic interaction—a phenomenon that Dimock and Felski would call 'resonance.'

Consider, for example, Mukařovský's reflections on the reception of the *poète maudits* (or the accursed poets) of the likes of Comte de Lautréamont, whose works failed to garner significant traction during their lifetimes. In his essay, "Art as a Semiotic Fact," Mukařovský deploys the example of the *poète maudits* to subvert the absolute analytical jurisdiction of a text's social context of production:

> The connection between certain works of art and the total context of social phenomena appears loose. The works of the so-called *poète maudits* ... are alien to the standards of contemporary values. But it is just for this reason that they remain excluded from literature and are only accepted by the collectivity at a moment when, as a consequence of the evolution of social context, they become capable of expressing it. (*Structure, Sign, and Function* 84)

On the face of it, this rather elementary observation has a predominantly *axiological* import. Mukařovský seems to be making the platitudinous claim that the maximal *value* of a (literary) work of art could be realized in a social context far removed from its moment of composition. However, Mukařovský's observations also undermine the hegemony of historicist contextualism. If a work of art is found to be loosely bound by causal or correlational links to the "total context of social phenomena" at its point of origin, its capacity for forging transtemporal ties with other semantic networks is considerably enhanced. The works of the *poète maudits* might have failed to resonate with the "standards of contemporary values" prevailing at their moment of origin, but their transtemporal affinities with temporally subsequent webs of value exemplify the impossibility of hemming in a text by its originary context. Similar assertions recur throughout Mukařovský's works, particularly in the late 1930s and the early 1940s.

In his 1941 essay "Structuralism in Esthetics and Literary Studies," Mukařovský makes broader claims about the ontology of text-context relations. Mukařovský argues that developmental

changes in literature or art must not be regarded as "unconditional or direct consequences of the development of society" (74). He elaborates on this further—"Even if there were no other factors to consider, it would be impossible to deduce unambiguously from a particular state of society the art that would correspond to it, or to know a society from the art which it produced or accepted as its own" (74). Here again, Mukařovský almost explicitly repudiates what Joseph North has recently described as "a singular, scholarly, historicist/contextualist paradigm" that would go on to gain absolute pre-eminence in literary scholarship in the last quarter of the century (59). The cornerstone of this historicist/contextualist paradigm is an unequivocal causal or correlational link between a literary/cultural text and its contemporaneous social context, and it is precisely this precondition that Mukařovský's inchoate posthistoricism denies. Mukařovský's voice could find an unexpected amplifier in the postcritical arguments of Rita Felski, who stresses the inadequacies of contextualist historicism's imperative to highlight the "correlations, causalities, or homologies between text-as-object and context-as-container" ("Context Stinks" 577). "History," Felski goes on to argue, is "not a box" that encloses within it a passive "object" called the text (574). Mukařovský's ontology of text-context relations also summarily rejects this "object in a box" model.

From the early 1930s, which Peter Steiner regards as the beginning of the second (and arguably the most memorable) phase of Mukařovský's career, the structuralist aesthetician tended to regard text and context as two distinct but mutually interacting series—one literary and the other extraliterary. Each series had its distinctive structural characteristics and evolutionary pathways but constantly impinged on the other. In a memorable passage from his analysis of the minor Czech poet Milota Zdirad Polák's work "The Sublimity of Nature," Mukařovský claims—"It is impossible to reduce the history of one series to the status of a commentary on the history of another series under the pretense that one of them is subordinate while the other is superior" (qtd. in Galan 54). Put in other words, according to Mukařovský, the practice of subsuming text within context (or vice-versa) is no longer tenable. The individual text is inextricably entangled not only with other texts and a series of literary norms but also with a complex web of extraliterary norms. Also, as the *poète maudits* example indicates, these points of entanglement are often not determined by relations of simultaneity. Contrary to the historicist/contextualist tendency to pass over these asynchronous points of text-context interaction, Mukařovský frequently foregrounds them in his studies.

The overlapping preoccupations of Mukařovský, Felski, and Dimock do not end here. An essay by Mukařovský titled "Can There Be a Universal Aesthetic Value in Art" concerns itself with how literary (or artistic) works achieve universal value or "a prolonged and renewed resonance" across space and time (*Structure, Sign, and Function* 58). A similar preoccupation with literary endurance pervades Dimock and Felski's manifestos for a diachronic posthistoricism. It must be mentioned, though, that the "universal" in the Mukařovskian sense is not a relapse into formalist or aestheticist notions of timeless and ahistorical value in literary works. Mukařovský's essay cautions against "adopting a static conception of universal value" and instead characterizes it

as a "live energy which to remain active must of necessity renew itself" (60). On this point, Mukařovský's voice is scarcely distinguishable from that of Wai Chee Dimock, who argues that the endurance of a literary text can be attributed "not to the text's timeless strength but to something like its timeful unwieldiness" (1062). The dynamic state of constant renewal, which also permeates Mukařovský's other works, lends a distinctively non-formalist and non-aestheticist tenor to his notion of universality in literature (and art) à la Felski and Dimock. Mukařovský, like many of the contemporary proponents of postcritique, strives to reconcile the singularity of literary works with their sociability. However, unlike Felski, who redirects her readers to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, Mukařovský provides a more detailed account of how a literary work, or any artwork for that matter, could retain vestiges of its universality amidst the constant flux of the semantic webs surrounding it.

The only point of rest in Mukařovský's heavily relativistic literary-theoretical and aesthetic formulation is the concept of an anthropological basis that informs the web of aesthetic norms against which a work is evaluated. This anthropological constant is enmeshed in the human psychophysiological constitution and "stays the same in different social milieux at different times" (Galan 168). According to Mukařovský, these anthropological postulates could explain the maximal cross-temporal and cross-cultural resonant potential, or the universal value, of specific literary works. Mukařovský nevertheless stops short of regarding the common anthropological principles as an absolute basis for the codification of prescriptive aesthetic norms. He avers that literary works will "always continue to reach the anthropological basis through new paths that it has not yet traveled," and each of these paths "corresponds to a certain social structure, or rather an existential attitude, which is peculiar to this structure" (*Structure, Sign, and Function* 68). In short, literary works, even those believed to be repositories of universal value, do not have a direct, unmediated communion with the anthropological base. Instead, they traverse constantly mutating, socially embedded webs of meaning and value that render the interpretation and evaluation of literary texts irreducibly dynamic processes.

Although the potential for resonance between the Mukařovskian text-context dynamic and the contemporary postcritical discourse on a transtemporal literary history is undeniable, the former lacks the methodological rigor to present itself as a viable alternative to mainstream critical historicism. In his own admission, Mukařovský calls his structuralist perspective on literature and art an "attitude" rather than a "theory" or "method." It is an epistemological position that cannot claim to be a "fixed body of knowledge" or a "homogenized and unchangeable set of working rules" that the terms theory and method imply ("Structuralism in Esthetics" 68). Mukařovskian practice is open-ended and leaves ample room for methodological refinement in light of future developments in the discipline. F.W. Galan, too, in his book-length study of Prague School structuralism, takes cognizance of Mukařovský's methodological vagueness (123). Galan questions the rationale behind Mukařovský's tendency to subordinate individual responses to the obscurely defined suprapersonal aggregate he calls "collective consciousness." These lacunae, nevertheless, provide significant leeway for devising novel postcritical and posthistoricist

interventions in literary and cultural scholarship. With this end in view, this study will adopt a moderately altered methodological approach from this point. Instead of focusing on individual theorists, it will give primacy to an individual concept, which, in turn, will weave together the perspectives of multiple theorists.

4. Promoting the Concept of Concretization as a Heuristic Tool in Literary Posthistoricism

It must by now be evident that a literary work, if it is to be viewed from a posthistoricist perspective, can no longer be regarded as a static entity having a stable and well-delimited extension in time. Various post-structuralist approaches to literature have already problematized the spatial boundaries of the text. Arguably, the most formidable challenge to conventional notions about the boundedness of a text was posed by the Russian-born Bulgarian theorist Julia Kristeva, who conceptualized a "literary word" as an "intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point" (36). The Kristevan concept of intertextuality weaves together Bakhtinian dialogism with French deconstruction, and it is hard to find better examples of cross-pollination between Slavic and Western European literary theoretical discourses. Intriguingly, though, "concretization"—another term emanating from Slavic literary theory—could prove congenial to a postcritical/posthistoricist literary scholarship inordinately confined to the Anglosphere. "Concretization" has become synonymous with reception-oriented literary theory in Slavic circles but has yet to gain any traction in American reception study. What makes the concept especially pertinent for this paper is that, besides serving as a point of contact between Anglophone and Slavic discourses on literature, it could play a role analogous to intertextuality in problematizing the temporal extension of the text. By viewing a text as an entity directed towards concretization rather than a mere material artifact, one is better placed to notice aspects of its complex transtemporal dynamics obscured by critical historicism.

The term "concretization" as a literary aesthetic concept can be traced back to the works of the Polish phenomenologist and aesthetician Roman Ingarden. Ingarden introduced the term while laying down the foundations of his philosophy of literature in two of his better-known books, which were later translated into English as *The Literary Work of Art* and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*. In addition to influencing German Rezeptionsästhetik, better known in the English-speaking world as the "aesthetics of reception," the Ingardenian philosophy of literature also actively shaped various formulations of reception study in Slavic circles. Piotr Sadzik identifies the Prague school of structuralism and the Polish school of literary communication as two of the most clearly discernible centers of reception of the Ingardenian concept of concretization (914). However, by the time the term had traveled from Polish phenomenology to Prague structuralism and then back to the study of literary communication in Poland, it had undergone sweeping transformations. At the outset of this spatiotemporal odyssey, in the introduction to *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art,* Roman Ingarden categorically states, "The literary work of art ... must be distinguished from its concretizations, which arise from individual

readings of the work" (13). Regardless of subsequent semantic shifts, the term "concretization" would continue to retain this association with individual readings of texts. According to Ingarden, the literary work is a multilayered schematic structure with several "places of indeterminacy," which are filled in by the reader to produce individual concretizations.

Subsequent theorizations of concretization, however, take exception to Ingarden's scant regard for the social moorings of the reader. The Polish literary theorist, Michał Głowiński, finds fault with the perception that the phenomenon of concretization is carried out "in what may be called laboratory conditions, where nothing interferes with the process" ("On Concretization" 332). Felix Vodička, a Prague school theorist who reworked Ingarden's formulation, critiques the latter's conception of a concretization as being "independent of the literary norm of the period" (110). By itself, Ingarden's theorization of concretization proves inadequate to a posthistoricist approach since it fails to reconcile the uniqueness of a literary work with its sociability and, by implication, its transtemporal mobility. However, replacing the material text with its aesthetically realized concretization as the focal point of inquiry proved propitious to scholars seeking to integrate the reader (or the perceiver) into mainstream literary/cultural history. The most notable among them was a protégé of Mukařovský and a second-generation Prague School theorist, Felix Vodička. In his 1941 study, which was later translated into English and titled "The Concretization of the Literary Work," Vodička notes how the few sporadic forays into literary reception made by his contemporaries tended towards "aesthetic dogmatism [or] extreme subjectivism" (108). In an attempt to devise a more nuanced methodology for a literary history of reception, Vodička appropriates, or better yet, translates the Ingardenian articulation of concretization to align it better with the structuralist aesthetics of his mentor, Jan Mukařovský. As will soon be evident, the product of this inter-paradigmatic exchange renders the idea of "concretization" more commensurate with the American posthistoricist ethos.

To better understand the utility of concretization as a heuristic tool in dealing with literary posthistoricism, it is essential to reiterate one of the central theses of this paper—posthistoricism requires as a necessary precondition the premise that texts are temporally both mobile and labile. To his credit, Roman Ingarden did distinguish between the skeletal framework of the material literary work and its concretization, which comes into being when the reader fills in the schematic places of the work. However, Vodička's reformulation of concretization broadened the concept's domain and rendered it a suitable foothold for studying the transtemporal affinities of texts. For Vodička, concretizing a literary work entails not just "filling in" the schematic places of the work but, rather, a restructuring of the entire work "projected against the background of the [reader's] immediate literary tradition" (110). Although this quote refers only to the "literary tradition," indicating a predilection for formalism, Vodička tended to follow his mentor Jan Mukařovský's project of studying literary reception as a "complex process governed by the total structure of life and values of the period" ("Structuralism in Esthetics" 76). Since Vodička's views were prone to vacillation, even more so than Mukařovský's, the task of identifying the literary historian's unequivocal theoretical position is doomed to futility. What is more germane

to the matter at hand, however, is that Vodička's theory of reception foregrounds the pliability of a text when concretized against what Wai Chee Dimock would later go on to call shifting semantic webs bearing "witness to the advance and retreat of social norms" (1060). Therefore, texts traveling through time manifest themselves as concretizations, which, in turn, are subject to the flow and ebb of literary and extraliterary norms. Certain concretizations resonate with the prevailing web of social norms and gain salience, while others are eventually attenuated.

Interestingly, Vodička also applies the concept of concretization to what he calls "higher literary units"—in this case, "literary groups, literary periods, and national literatures" (129). The realization that even periodization schemes in literary scholarship are, in fact, concretizations, has profound posthistoricist implications that Vodička himself never recognized and, therefore, slipped back into more conventional modes of literary historicism. When placed in conversation with American posthistoricist discourses, the subversive potential of Vodička's insights becomes more apparent. For instance, Russell A. Berman offers a host of compelling reasons why embedding a literary work within its historical context of production, while "not inappropriate to the study of literature ... is antiquarian, at best" (329). However, what could have further bolstered Berman's argument is the observation that any "historical context" posited by critical historicist modes of analysis is not a timeless unit perfectly immune to subsequent alterations in literary and extraliterary norms. For sure, Berman does talk about revisionist battles over prevailing periodization schemes, but he does not elaborate on how the same contextual label, say, for example, "Victorian" or "Sturm und Drang," could take up an entirely different shape over time. Placing Berman and his fellow American posthistoricist thinkers in conversation with Vodička on this point offers immense scope for a symbiotic cross-cultural and cross-temporal exchange.

If the literary text, as Anglophone posthistoricist commentaries contend, is a half-entity with no well-demarcated spatiotemporal expanse, so is its putative context. While discussing the concretization of higher literary units, Vodička declares that "even a literary period is a structure made rich by the dynamic tension of its components, so that a current conception is only one of many ways of concretizing it" (130). Just like the material substratum of a literary work, or any work of art for that matter, its "context" is realized only when it is concretized against the backdrop of the web of norms surrounding its reception. Hence, contextualization closely resembles reception insofar as both are *situated acts*. Inseparable from the concretizing processes that they are ceaselessly subjected to, both texts and contexts "constantly [change] under changing temporal, local, social, and even individual conditions" (110). Depending on the frame of reference, different aspects of a period (or any other higher literary unit) come into focus, while others might altogether fade into obscurity. Therefore, literary or cultural historicism, when pictured in the light of the aforementioned observations, is no longer a "pile of neatly stacked boxes," in each of which "individual texts are encased or held fast" (Felski 577). The boxes, standing in for contextualizing periods, ceaselessly resist their neat organization as they change shape when viewed from different frames of reference. Hence, the resistance to historicist contextualization is mutually reinforced by both text and context. The text, when viewed

as a material entity seeking concretization by the reader, tends to tunnel across contextual boundaries. On the other hand, the contextual boundaries themselves facilitate this slippage by tending to change shape upon concretization. In short, critical contextualization schemes are not just unduly restrictive but also ontologically unstable.

5. Tapping into Concretizations by Lay Readers as Testimonies of Reception

As mentioned earlier in this paper, one of the foremost commitments of postcritique is the reclamation of lay reading practices, which had hitherto been relegated to the margins of literary scholarship. Quite expectedly, the posthistoricist strand of postcritique, too, shares a fair amount of this enthusiasm for the lay reader. For instance, one of the many rationales Rita Felski provides for advancing Bruno Latour's actor-network theory as a processual guide in the study of transtemporal affinities is that it is "less censorious of ordinary experiences of reading" ("Context Stinks" 585). Acolytes of postcritique regard critical historicism as passé, not least because it calls forth a certain professional pride on the part of the academically trained reader, who probes for a text's links to its contemporaneous social conditions that lay readers often tend to ignore. In this regard, Vodička's outline for a history of reception of literary works fails to be postcritical (and posthistoricist) enough. Disregarding the importance of extra-institutional commentaries by lay readers in their diaries, memoirs, or letters as viable testimonies of concretization, Vodička asserts that it is the professional critic's role to "establish the concretizations of literary works, incorporating them into the system of literary values" (112). Vodička cites the subjectivity, heterogeneity, and ephemerality of lay reading experiences as grounds for their exclusion from his reception theory. The putatively enhanced objectivity of a reception study based on the academically mandated critic's concretizations, however, comes at a significant cost. With ordinary reading experiences no longer in the field of view, most new avenues for research on the transtemporal connections forged by texts are blotted out. It is precisely this narrowing of horizons that postcritical and posthistoricist discourses in literary/cultural studies tend to counter.

Until Felix Vodička, the notion of concretization asserts only a weak claim to the status of a critical concept in tracing transtemporal textual movements. After all, Vodička, for all his resourcefulness, remains firmly entrenched in contextualist analyses and professional elitism—both of which are largely anathema to postcritique and its allied project of posthistoricism. The theory of concretization could be given a more prominent posthistoricist inflection if one considers a lesser-known reworking of the concept by a literary theorist belonging to the Polish school of literary communication—Michał Głowiński. While Vodička's untenable quest for an Archimedean standpoint in reception study limits him to testimonies produced by professional literary critics, Głowiński significantly expands his repertoire of testimonies to include concretizations produced by untutored readers (Mrugalski 701). In one of his seminal essays on the various testimonies and styles of reception, Głowiński lists five kinds of testimonies that include all kinds of literary,

paraliterary, and critical documents. Among these, he assigns a prominent place to records of reading in intimate diaries and personal correspondences—a category summarily rejected by Vodička ("Testimonies" 12–13). Moreover, for Vodička, the context of *production* of a work simply makes way for the context of *reception*, and the latter is a relatively homogeneous "set of circumstances making it possible to perceive and evaluate a given work aesthetically" (119). In a way, Vodička's modified contextualism fails to do justice to Mukařovský's views on the web of social norms molding the act of reception. Mukařovský's context of reception, if at all it can be called a context, is far more heterogeneous and accommodative of lay readers. Głowiński arrests Vodička's backsliding into contextualism to some extent by not only heterogenizing the context of reception but calling into question the very possibility of a scientistic study of reception.

Although Głowiński's theory of reception would undoubtedly appeal to researchers invested in postcritique, how could one tap into his theory to generate new research possibilities in a posthistoricist (and postcritical) academe? Indeed, Głowiński's insights could be deployed as a point of departure for new scholarly approaches to the history of reading. Głowiński himself hints at a new area of scholarly inquiry in his essay "O konkretyzacji" ("On Concretization"). For Głowiński, unlike Vodička, a reading recalcitrant to the prevailing concretization norms could be more worthy of the literary historian's attention than more widely accepted interpretations. In a passage that has hardly garnered any scholarly attention, Głowiński hints at the value of such outlying responses to texts:

> Concretization may consist in a simple repetition of the interpretation prevailing in a given group, but it may crystallize in spite of the accepted interpretation of a given work—then it is also determined by this interpretation, though in a different way. There are situations when a work seems to be snowballed with concretizations, which cease to be a matter of individual approaches and gain the status of universal cultural values of the epoch. (343)

A literary/cultural studies scholar interested in the history of reading should find this excerpt particularly enlightening. Although it would be unfair to claim that the history of reading has swept recalcitrant readings produced by untutored readers under the carpet, they have so far mainly been considered peripheral to more urgent research questions. If made the focal point of scholarly inquiry, these outlying responses to literary works could significantly alter the landscape of literary studies, broadening the scope of some sub-disciplines while challenging the hegemony of others.

As Głowiński indicates in the quote above, a recalcitrant concretization could occasionally form the nucleus around which a subsequently normative concretization for a particular cohort of readers is crystallized. Invoking the terminology of Anglophone posthistoricism once again, these concretizations could prove to be a "resonant touchstone" that produces an unexpectedly amplified response among readers in a spatiotemporal coordinate far removed from the production of the work (Felski 588). This view has not been unheard of in literary history and

canon studies. If Franco Moretti is to be believed, ordinary readers play an active role in forming the canon through a "feedback loop of increasing returns" (211). The historian of reading would do well to investigate the dynamics of such transtemporal affinities with untutored reading communities. Moreover, any mention of resonance invokes the antithetical possibility of attenuation. If the resonant possibilities of outlying concretizations produced by lay readers are of considerable scholarly interest, so is the complementary question of how most of these readings lose salience when faced with institutional and/or market pressures, not to mention various other literary and extraliterary factors. Whether or not Bruno Latour's actor-network theory can provide a definitive answer to questions such as this is open to debate. Felski herself does not conclusively settle the debate—far from it. While such methodological skirmishes are best reserved for discussions in the future, it must by now be evident that posthistoricist literary studies could ill afford to discount ordinary readers if they wish to study the transtemporal dynamics of texts and their concretizations.

6. Conclusion

This research article is suffused with a plethora of intercrossings and entanglements. Arguably, the most emphasized intercrossing in this study is a spatial one that sets up a conduit between two mutually isolated bodies of discourse, each parochially confined to a set of spatial coordinates—'America' or 'Slavia,' as the case may be. However, this cross-cultural intercrossing also entails cross-temporal entanglements among literary-theoretical paradigms distributed across a span of around seven decades. Posthistoricism, which is at the core of this article, places a high premium on the tracing of transtemporal resonances. This study has itself engineered a resonant interaction across a cultural and temporal chasm, although the discursive paradigms involved in this case are primarily literary-theoretical or critical. In the process of these intersections, the discourses involved have mutually balanced out their blind spots and lacunae, thereby mounting an amplified diatribe against the persistent academic injunction to historicize literary (and cultural) texts. Metacritical reflections of this kind on the hegemony of historicism in literary/cultural studies, however, cannot be dismissed as mere intellectual navel-gazing, as they possess a substantial agentive force. They could significantly alter the landscape of literary research, rejuvenating sub-disciplines such as histories and ethnographies of reading, while simultaneously impeding the proliferation of interpretive studies involving varying but marked degrees of historicist contextualization. It is conceivable that the figure of the lay reader might take center stage in this posthistoricist upheaval. After all, lay readers play no mean role in transtemporal resonances and the attendant process of canon formation. Historians of reading and theorists of canon formation would do well to thematize these transtemporal (and transcultural) processes.

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