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BOOK REPORTS

Shklovsky and His "Monument to a Scientific Error"

March 2014



Viktor Shklovsky, 1930.

Viktor Shklovsky was one of the foremost literary theorists and critics of the twentieth century. In becoming a leader of the school of thought called "Russian Formalism," he exercised immense influence on modern conceptions of literature. He was also a journalist, a screenwriter, an experimental novelist, and a powerful voice against Stalinist oppression of literary culture.

Russian Formalism emerged before the 1917 revolutions, but after the October putsch by the Bolsheviks, it became allied for a time with the avant-garde of the period. Most Formalists admired innovation, but they also thought that every innovation owed a good deal to its predecessors. Sometimes the most modern work found its sources in the distant past. Shklovsky's essays of the 1910s and 1920s sought to disclose some "universal laws" of art, particularly of prose literature. Influenced by the rise of folklore studies, he scanned the world's literature looking



for storytelling techniques that seemed to migrate from place to place and period to period. "Plots," he once wrote, "are homeless." Shklovsky laid out some basic principles of narrative in the essays collected in *Theory of Prose* (1925, 1929).

Other Formalists came up with complementary ways of thinking about literature. For example, most Formalists opposed seeing literature as straightforwardly reflecting the social world. But there were differences. Shklovsky thought that any material brought into the literary work would be shaped by the inherent laws of art, like "defamiliarization." For his friend Yuri Tynianov, art reshaped the real-world material according to more localized conventions, those of certain genres and periods. A work's relation to those conventions gave the text its specific identity.

One corollary that Tynianov emphasized was that the same artistic device or form might have very different functions in different epochs. To Shklovsky's search for universal plot patterns Tynianov counterposed the idea of the shaping role of "the literary system," the various currents at work in a tradition. At one period, a plot based on peasant customs might be treated as comic, whereas in another it might constitute pathetic drama. From this standpoint, it would be hard to write a history of "the sonnet," since that literary form assumed different significance in different milieus.

Many Soviet intellectuals had invoked the Bolshevik versions of Marxism in order to denounce the Formalists, but it seemed that the study of such milieus could lead to properly Marxist analyses of literary history. Tynianov, Boris Eichenbaum, and other Formalists pointed out that once the "literary system" of a time became the center of study, the scholar would have to investigate institutions like publishing, salon gatherings, and other social activities. Those in turn be related, perhaps in some rather indirect ways, to the economic base of a given society.

This rapprochement did not take. By the end of the 1920s pressure had mounted to a ferocious level. Proletarian literary organizations insisted that Shklovsky, Tynianov, and their peers had failed to grant the proper primacy to social, and especially economic, factors in explaining literature. In this atmosphere, Shklovsky published his essay, "Monument to a Scientific Error," in 1930.

It has usually been taken as a sign of capitulation, in which Shklovsky confessed his own research to have been mistaken. Victor Erlich's standard history of the movement, *Russian Formalism: History, Doctrine*, describes him as "losing his nerve." But other scholars of Formalism have suggested that the piece might not be a simple abjuration.

Aleksandar Flaker has pointed out that there is evidence, from Shklovsky's correspondence with Eichenbaum, that in 1929 he was moving closer to Tynianov's view that parallel or rival "literary systems" shape the history of forms. More assertively, Richard Sheldon argues that Shklovsky had a history of using the rhetoric of surrender as a formal device itself, and of employing

metaphors to suggest that he isn't repudiating his deepest beliefs. As for the "Monument" essay, Sheldon makes the case that Shklovsky shrewdly redefines "Formalism" as the earliest period of the movement, in order to defend the most recent, more functional version of it. His invocation of Tynianov and Eichenbaum shows that he is casting his lot with them.

Finally, his quotation from Marx could be seen as obeisance to gods now believed in. But it seems just as likely that he wanted to remind the partisans that aspects of the superstructure, like legal practices, change at a rate not synchronized with changes in the economic base. Why not the same with art and literature? Not only economics but social relations shape the development of art, and these aren't reducible to sheer material conditions. "As regards art," Marx wrote in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, "it is well known that some of its peaks by no means correspond to the general development of society; nor do they therefore to the material substructure."

Those who don't read Russian have not been able to judge the piece because it has not been available in English. This is why I'm happy to post Maria Belodubrovskaya's translation on our site, for the benefit of all who are interested in seeing Shklovsky's career whole. Of course it needs to be studied in its many contexts, but at least now we have another piece signed by this brilliant, prolific, and clever thinker.

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Viktor Shklovsky:

**Monument to a Scientific Error
[Pamiatnik nauchnoi oshibke]**

Literaturnaia gazeta, no. 4, 27 January 1930, p. 1

Translated by Maria Belodubrovskaya

I

The heightened attention now directed at the so-called Formal Method and the hostile nature of this attention are easy to explain.

A person who maintains or maintained that class struggle does not extend to literature neutralizes certain sectors of the front by doing so.

It is impossible to say that today's art lacks social purpose. It also seems natural that research interest in literary history shifts to the most purposeful, publicistic so to speak, periods.

At the same time it turns out that where a neutrality or a lack of social purpose actually existed, that neutrality was actually pursuing its own, strongly directed goals.

At the same time the so-called Formal Method should not be viewed as a reaction against the revolution.

Our initial works appeared in the period between 1914 and 1917.

The Formalists' initial works were directed at the creation of a typology and morphology of a literary work.

At the nascent stage of scientific literary study, such work was necessary but insufficient, as it constituted not even an anatomy of literary works but a protocol for their autopsy.

To abstract the literary plane from other social planes was a working hypothesis useful for the initial accumulation and systematization of facts.

Engels wrote that when studying nature, history, or human spiritual activity, the student first captures only the general picture of diverse connections and interactions.

"...But this conception, however correctly it grasps the general character of the phenomena as a whole, yet is insufficient to explain the separate parts out of which that whole is composed; and so long as we do not know these, neither are we clear about the whole itself. In order to learn to know these separate parts, we must take them out of their natural or historic connections, and inquire, in each case separately, into their qualities, their special causes, their operation, etc."  1

Our error was not that we provisionally separated the literary plane, but that this separation became fixed.

My approach consisted of taking remote examples from literatures of different eras and national contexts and of asserting their aesthetic equivalence. I studied each of these works as a closed system, outside of that system's correlation with the literary system as a whole and with the primary, culture-forming economic plane.

Empirically, in the process of inquiry into literary phenomena, it became clear that every work exists only against the background of another work and that it can be understood only as part of the literary system.

I incorporated this observation into my work, but failed to draw main conclusions from it.

This was my error.

II

The emergence of literary forms is a mass social process. *Vechera zabavnye* [Funny Evenings], *Vechera melankholicheskije* [Melancholic Evenings], *Vechera sel'skie* [Village Evenings], and *Vechernie chasy* [Evening Hours] have been succeeded by Narezhnyi's *Slavenskie večera* [Slavic Evenings] and Gogol's *Vechera na khutore bliz Dikan'ki* [Evenings Near the Village of Dikanka].²

Compare also the accumulation of similar pseudonyms in the poetry of the 1860s: "Denunciatory Poet," "Mornfut Poet," "Dark Poet," "New Poet," and even "New Poet 2."

Boris Eichenbaum attempted a revision of the Formal Method. This revision started with rightly substituting the term "morphological" method for the term "formal" method. This rid [the method] of the ambiguity in the expression "formal" and at the same time described more precisely the method of analysis. Extremely important works by Yuri Tynianov, who introduced to literary study the concept of literary function (the idea that literary elements have different significance at different times), marked a turning point in the method's evolution.

Very little remained here of the initial, then already naïve definition that a work equals the sum of its devices. Parts of a literary work do not add up but correlate. A literary form seems to be semantically all of one piece, but actually it is semantically quite diverse, even when its formal features seem similar to those in other works.

It became clear that one could not study individual devices in isolation, as all of them correlate with one another and with the literary system as a whole.

This transitional point of view was a difficult one and in my case was accompanied by a number of relapses to the old way of thinking.

The main difficulty was in determining the relationship between the literary plane—and in general between the planes of so-called culture—and the base plane.

III

In Jules Romains' novel *Donogoo Tonka*, a city built as a result of a scientist's error erects a monument to a scientific error.

I had no desire to stand as a monument to my own error.

This is why I tried to move on to historical-literary work.

My first historical study was the book *Material i stil' v romane L'va Tolstogo "Voyna i mir"* [Material and Style in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*].

In this book, I was interested in the laws of deformation of historical material that are determined by the author's class. Tolstoy's goal led him to create a nobility *agitka* [propaganda piece]: to portray the victory of pre-reform Russia by pre-reform means.

Tolstoy's task was thus to contrast the War of 1812 with the Crimean War.

He wanted to propose not a reform but a retreat.

Tolstoy's contemporaries grasped this tendency in the novel. Curiously, a caricature in the *Iskra* magazine (No. 16, 1868) showed Tolstoy writing in front of a fireplace decorated with a statuette of Napoleon—not Napoleon I but Napoleon III. In the caricature, Tolstoy was shown seated with his back to the viewer. The writer's face was yet unknown, but his tendency was clear.

Further in the book, I discussed the very important question of the novel's assimilation of inertial literary forms. I did not show extensively enough in the book (and plan to do it here) that the entire belletristic arsenal employed by Tolstoy and all the novel's situations had been known before from works of Ushakov (*Posledniy is knyazey Korsunskikh*), Zagoskin (*Roslavlev*), Bulgarin (*Pyotr Vyzhigin*), Vel'tman (*Lunatik*), and Pert Sumarokov (*Kol'tso i zapiska*).

However, in Tolstoy's novel all of these traditional situations have a new function and are presented as interactions derived from the poetics of the school of naturalism. The novel correlates familiar novels in a new way and presents them on a different lexical plane. The author's intent was not fully realized. Class groupings of readers serve as resonators to a literary work. The author failed in his task to write a novel against *raznochintsy* [19th century Russian intellectuals not of gentle birth], an anti-reform novel so to speak. The author's goal failed to coincide with the objective role of his work.

IV

Inquiry into literary evolution should take social context into account and should be complicated by a consideration of various literary trends. Each of these seeps into various class strata to a different extent and is variously recreated anew by these strata.

These premises determined my most recent work on *Matvei Komarov, zhitel' goroda Moskvyy* [Matvei Komarov, an Inhabitant of the City of Moscow].

I felt that the question of a sudden emergence of Russian prose in the 1830s had not been sufficiently clarified.

As I searched for its origins, I established its connection with 18th-century prose. From Vel'tman through *Kashchii Bessmertnii* and from Dal' through the fairytale *O vore i buroi korove* I came to Mikhail Chekhov. From Tolstoy with his folk tales and his attempts to cater to the *muzhik* [peasant man] I came to Komarov.

Eighteen-century prose was mass prose. Many books had fairly large print runs and came out in multiple editions. This prose served the lowest stratum of nobility and the merchant class, as well as the part of peasantry that gravitated towards petty bourgeoisie.

The elevation of Russian prose can probably be explained by the elevation of the class it served. Russian prose did not emerge anew in the 1830s; it changed its function.

V

When studying questions such as these, one needs to remember that the rate at which various ideological superstructures evolve does not need to necessarily coincide with the rate at which the base develops.

In his unfinished *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx pointed to these discrepancies.

“6... *the Unequal Development of Material Production and, e.g., that of Art*. The concept of progress is on the whole not to be understood in the usual abstract form... However, the really difficult point to be discussed here is how the relations of production as legal relations take part in this uneven development.”

“For example the relation of Roman civil law (this applies in smaller measure to criminal and constitutional law) to modern production.”³

Thus, for example, many forms of feudal law have remained untouched in bourgeois England. As opposed to this, in France after the revolution the old Roman law was adapted to fit the newest capitalist relations.

At times in literature such adaptation is accomplished through parodying.

Thus, to create denunciatory civic poetry, Nekrasov and *Iskra* poets (Minaev, Kurochkin, etc.) adapted parodied forms of Pushkin's and Lermontov's verse. It is not an individual work or an individual image (*obraz*) that correlates with the social plane but literature as a system.

One might think that we often label classical precisely those works that have lost their initial purpose and have fully become inertial forms.

Old-time censors understood this very well. Censor Ol'dekop (1841) supported tragedy. He wrote:

“In general, similarly to opera and ballet, tragedy can be considered the most harmless branch of dramatic art.”

And elsewhere:

“If tragedy was given a wider field, the influence of comedy would decrease. *The Inspector General* will less engage the public that has seen *King Lear*. Having found in tragedy pleasure of purely literary and artistic sort, the public will be less

eager to look for a hint in comedy.”

It is clear that tragedy, and Greek and Shakespeare tragedy in particular, had a clear social purpose at some point in time. However, later (by Ol'dekop's time) tragedy became “literary pleasure.”

As we think of the importance of learning from the classics, we undoubtedly need to incorporate into our very conception of classicism its quality as “literary pleasure.”

VI

The emergence of a new form is preceded by the process of quantitative accumulation in the inertial form (in its non-consequential sites, so to speak) of elements that seep from neighboring social planes.

Processes happen through leaps and through the transformation of a deviation into a quality of a new genre. The old form itself exists and remains unchanged formally but changes functionally.

A *tolstovka* was originally a nobleman's (hunting) outfit. Both Tolstoy and Turgenev wore this outfit. This same outfit became *tolstovka* when Tolstoy wore it to social gatherings (in place of a frock coat). Then it was a different outfit, although it remained exactly the same. In the case of a Soviet office worker, *tolstovka* takes a third form, so to speak; it attains the third change in function. The matter is complicated even further by the fact that *tolstovka* is influenced by the service jacket and the sports coat.

The emergence of a new form does not completely eradicate the inertial form, but changes (usually narrows) its area of application. Thus, the genres of fairy tale and chivalry novel, which have become obsolete as high literature, are shifting to children's and *lubok* [popular folk] literatures.

Literary evolution needs to be understood not as a continuous flow and not as an inheritance of certain assets, but as a process that is accompanied by a succession of contesting forms, by a reconception of these forms, and by leaps, breaks, and so forth.

Literature needs to study the continuity of the changing system of means of social impact.

People still think of the Formal Method in terms of its initial stage, when elementary conceptions were being defined, the material was being selected, and the terminology was becoming established.

As far as I am concerned, Formalism is a road already traversed —traversed and left several stages behind. The most important stage was the shift to taking into account the function of literary form. The only thing left over from the Formal Method is the terminology that is now being used by everybody. Also left over is a series of observations of a technological nature.

But to study literary evolution on the social plane the crude sociological approach is absolutely worthless.

It is essential to turn to the study of the Marxist Method as a whole.

Obviously, I am not declaring myself a Marxist, because one does not join scientific methods. One masters them and one creates them.

¹ : F. Engels's, *Razvitie sotsializma ot utopii k nauke* (Moscow, 1924), p. 53 [Frederick Engels, *The Development of Socialism from Utopia to Science*]. Trans. note: The exact quotation from Engels reads: "When we contemplate either nature, the history of man, or our own intellectual activity, the first picture presented to us is one of an endless intertwining of mutually connected forces."

² : Trans. note: These titles are translated literally to maintain Shklovsky's repetition. English titles of these works may vary.

³ : Karl Marx. *K kritike politicheskoi ekonomii* (PTG, 1922) Trans. note: The quotation appears in Appendix 1 (section 4) of Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

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