



Prague Linguistic Circle, morphology, and structuralism. Shklovsky coined the term “*ostranenie*” (остранение, estrangement), one of the most important “devices” of poetic language and an essential concept for the “scientific method” of formalist textual analysis. Though he was well known in Russia from the late 1910s, it was not until the 1950s that Western thinkers began to take notice of his provocative ideas about literary form.

Shklovsky was born in St Petersburg into a family of Russian-German-Jewish origin and grew up in the Tsarist capital where his father worked as a mathematics teacher. He studied philology and history at St Petersburg University during the economically meager but culturally rich years of World War I. During the war, Shklovsky volunteered for the Tsarist army, then later joined the Socialist Revolutionary Party and served on the Petrograd Soviet and fought in the civil war (1918–21) against the Bolsheviks. In contrast to the revolutionary atmosphere of the period 1905–17, the academic environment upon his return to the university was still committed to traditional literary history: dealing with authors, their biographies, and most of all with the ideas they present. Young students, however, in a euphoric mood of innovation, wanted to tread new paths. They gathered in private circles to discuss the literary works themselves, especially contemporary futurist poems. In his seminal study *Russian Formalism*, Victor Erlich described the atmosphere of creative excitement of this period: “There was an air of intellectual excitement about these unique gatherings, combining the earnestness of the linguist’s laboratory with the buoyant flippancy of a literary café” (1980 [1955]: 69). Inspired by Russian Futurism and its experimental use of language (by Mayakovsky and others), Shklovsky developed his own original theses on literature. His first public appearance was character-

istic of his later nonacademic professional career. It occurred after midnight on December 23, 1913, in the St Petersburg avant-garde artists’ nightclub and cabaret, the Stray Dog, where he presented a paper on “The place of futurism in the history of language” to a mixed audience of bohemian intellectuals. This atmosphere of “scientific sociability” suited Shklovsky’s own evolving style: astute, witty, trenchant, telegrammatic, but vivid and full of ideas and associations.

Shklovsky’s many books and thousands of articles in the following years documented his creative and scholarly ambitions (Sheldon 1977). His first, groundbreaking Stray Dog article was incorporated into “The resurrection of the word” (1914), in which he asserts a fundamental linguistic difference between poetic and common language. While the word in everyday speech is “petrified” (fossilized) through “habituation” and restricted to merely cognitive understanding, poetry succeeds in “revitalizing” the word, making it perceivable. By creating “new forms of art,” the poet makes us “see, not only recognize” (Shklovsky 1973b[1914]: 42–6).

Shklovsky developed a fundamental component of Russian formalist theory – a methodology for analyzing literary devices – and defined the task of formalist criticism. He met weekly with Boris Eikhenbaum, Yury Tynyanov, Osip Brik, and the linguist Lev Yakubinsky, in what from 1916 was called the “Society for the Study of Poetic Language” (OPOYAZ). This was a forum for debating and for publishing on formalist subjects: on words, sounds, style, plot, and story. Such investigations into poetic devices could make sense even of the transrational, “trans-sense-language” poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov, who postulated the primacy of sound over meaning and saw the aesthetic experience in the phonetic instrumentation and rhythm of a poem

(Shklovsky 1919[1916]). In cooperation with Jakobson's Moscow Linguistic Circle (MLK), Shklovsky and the OPOYAZ developed a full-fledged formalist theory.

Shklovsky's seminal article "Art as device," first published in an OPOYAZ anthology in 1917, was regarded as the "manifesto of formalism," in which Shklovsky illustrates how, in contrast to common language, poetic language achieves its "resurrection." Among other devices (such as retardation or digression), *ostranenie* (making strange) is the essential artistic principle. As a neologism, this Russian word *ostranenie* is itself "estranging" – and is not easily translatable: the most common translations in English are "alienation," "estrangement," "enstrangement," and "defamiliarization." *Ostranenie* in literature has a double effect. First, by different means it counteracts the usual automation of our perception, prevents habituation, and "lead[s] us to a 'knowledge' of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition." Second, defamiliarization makes us conscious of the literary *form* itself which is the actual object of art and criterion for aesthetic value. "By 'enstranging' objects and complicating form," Shklovsky writes, "the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious.' Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artefact itself is quite unimportant; the object is not important" (1990a[1917]: 5–6).

In the 1920s, Shklovsky clarified in greater detail how "*sjuzhet*" (plot) construction – the organization of motifs within a narrative – is decisive for the specific "*zhanr*" (genre), be it a fairy tale, parody, adventure story, or film. "Sjuzhet devices" like repetition, retardation, and parallelism build a "staircase construction" of increasing effectiveness. As such "the form creates content for itself" (1973a: 54, 56). This thesis, too rigidly understood by Soviet politicians, was soon considered untenable. Towards the end of the 1920s, formalism

and Shklovsky were accused of neglecting the real task of art: to educate the "new socialist man." But Shklovsky was no apolitical, otherworldly theorist. From early on he engaged actively in the political movements of the time, and the range and versatility of his output was inextricably linked to the momentous political and cultural changes in Russia throughout his lifetime.

In 1920 Shklovsky was appointed as a lecturer at the Institute of Art History in Petrograd and lived in the House of Arts, the center of active literary life in the city. He also initiated, together with Maxim Gorky, Evgeny Zamyatin, and others, the young writers' group the Serapion Brothers, to support the writing projects of 12 gifted writers. But by the end of 1921, the experimental character of the Serapions' prose lost official backing; in the following year, when the secret police began to arrest members of the Social Revolutionist Party, Shklovsky fled into exile. Like so many political refugees he went to Berlin, where he published *A Sentimental Journey* (1970 [1923]). The title, in a double sense ironical, alludes to Laurence Sterne's novel of the same name, but Shklovsky's journey was far from being "sentimental." It was a journey through war, famine, illness, and death, an account of the atrocities of the civil war and of the early Bolshevik regime. Though he narrates like Sterne in a disjointed, episodic way, full of digressions, his style is distant and impartial. The book includes fascinating portraits of artists and writers whom Shklovsky had met during these years – including Nikolai Gumilyov, Alexander Blok, and Osip Mandelstam.

Shklovsky's second book published in Berlin, *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love* (1971[1923]), is an autobiographical novel in 30 "letters" from the unhappy émigré, alien and lonely in Berlin after World War I. The book reflects on the author's unrequited love for a beautiful young

Moscow émigré (Elsa Triolet, later wife of the French writer Louis Aragon), by creating a distant and unfamiliar poetic picture of the crisis-ridden, though culturally lively, capital of Germany. The startling final letter is addressed to the Party Central Committee, begging for permission to return to his home country. Shklovsky's involuntary stay in Berlin lasted from April 1922 until June 1923. With the help of Gorky and Mayakovsky he obtained an amnesty that allowed him to return to Russia.

In Moscow Shklovsky joined the arts group Left Front (LEF), an alliance of Marxist-Futurists, Constructivists, and Formalists, organized by Mayakovsky in 1922. It was founded to oppose the growing influence of conservative groups like the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP). Convinced that avant-garde literature was the most appropriate expression of the new and liberated revolutionary mind, LEF insisted on the freedom of art. Shklovsky's autobiography, *Third Factory* (2002[1926]), reflects the crisis – and does so in futurist style. In 1925, and again in 1929, Shklovsky was able to reprint some of his most important articles on formalist theory in the anthology *Theory of Prose*. But politically formalism was already on the decline.

When, towards the end of the 1920s, Stalin strengthened his political position by forcing the unity of all spheres of social and cultural life, “proletarian writers,” supported by the political authorities, gained primacy over “avant-gardists” at the “cultural front.” The all-embracing Union of Soviet Writers, founded in 1932, put writers politically and economically under party control. At their first All-Union Congress in August 1934 in Moscow, the political statement came first: Andrei Zhdanov, Secretary of the Communist Party, defined the role and responsibilities of writers in society. After him Gorky declared “socialist

realism” to be the basis of the literary program and the obligatory style. Shklovsky, who was not a party member, spoke at the sixth session. In a short but original contribution he pleaded for a new humanism and the admissibility of sentiments in literature. In 1934 Stalinist purges began.

Respecting Shklovsky's integrity, Richard Sheldon remarks in his introduction to *Sentimental Journey* that Shklovsky “dutifully recited and nominally heeded the official formulas required during the Stalinist era, but he never completely surrendered his early positions” (1970: xxiv). His adaptability, originality, prolific productivity, and popularity in Russia contributed to Shklovsky's survival in the Stalin years. He never stopped writing, but cautiously concentrated on literary prose, memoirs, and film scripts instead of literary theory (Sheldon 1977).

Shklovsky's influence has been wide ranging. Bertolt Brecht, who used the term “*Verfremdungseffekt*” (“alienation effect”) in his theoretical writing on theatre in 1936, probably came across Shklovsky's term *ostranenie* while visiting Moscow in 1935 (Trebeck 1989). In Prague, Jan Mukařovský developed Shklovsky's formalist thoughts into structuralism, as did Yuri Lotman in Tartu, Estonia, with his structural-semiotic method. In the West, Erlich's analysis (1955) laid the groundwork for further scholarly investigations (Sheldon 1966; Striedter 1969, 1989). From the mid-1960s, as an increasing numbers of formalist theorists were being introduced to the West and as interest in Marxism and revolutionary Russia was being renewed, Shklovsky's work was translated and widely disseminated among a diverse field of scholars and critics (Jameson 1972; Bennett 1979).

SEE ALSO: Defamiliarization; *Fabula/Sjuzhet*; Formalism; Jakobson, Roman; Jameson, Fredric; Marxism;

Propp, Vladimir; Semiotics/Semiology;  
Structuralism

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