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# *Motalka*, or Time in Chiasmus: Viktor Shklovsky's "Revolutionary Choice of the Past"

Original study

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**Abstract**: An important part of Viktor Shklovsky's legacy remains neglected by scholars of formalism and questioned for political reasons: his controversial critical and political interventions, as well as his work in propaganda on behalf of the Stalinist regime. Personal memories of Shkovsky and whatever is available in his publications from that period all convey a sense of compromising uncertainty. I am suggesting that his work during that period has special value, even though it arises from the shadow of a doubt that surrounds his private and public images as a Stalinist opportunist. Based on his earlier theoretical findings and his practical and critical competence in literature and film, Shklovsky found original analytical tools to reflect temporality, historical experience, and (Soviet) subjectivity under political violence. His profound critical revision of his early theoretical postulates in the light of historical experience gained during this controversial period is relevant nowadays.

**Keywords**: Viktor Shklovsky, anachrony, chiasmus, theory of history, film and literary theory.

## INTRODUCTION: ON DISGRACE

After February 24th, 2022, the date of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, for Russian or Russia-born cultural workers, creative writers, and scholars of Russian literature and culture, Viktor Shklovsky's experience of living in disgrace as a Stalinist cultural worker after the death of Stalin and the denunciation of Stalinism, suddenly became a reality. The Russian invasion of Ukraine left an indelible mark of infamy on everyone directly or indirectly connected with Russian culture; and Russian literature, with its understanding of itself as the paragon of humanism and high morals, was sent a notice of cancellation for having systematically failed to resist an inherent hegemonic impulse. Since then, self-accusations and accusations, rejections or confessions of unspecified guilt have been exchanged, and self-criticism often sounds somewhat narcissistic, which attitude confirms rather than undermines the general hegemonic attitude. Nietzsche's and then Freud's warnings, respectively, against the dangers of guilt-associated morality and fetishistic guilt feelings (as opposed to the consciousness of responsibility) nowadays appear more relevant than ever. Disgrace is punished by public humiliation, the loss of (self)respect, infamy, in the best case, utter embarrassment. Looking into Shklovsky's own and his generation's experience of dealing with these consequences of their own commitments, might be useful for the present-day intellectuals explaining to themselves and others, and struggling against, the guilt and shame of betrayal and self-betrayal that they failed to prevent.

In this essay, I intend to break with the tradition of reading Shklovsky as an agglomeration of "multiple personalities": a revolutionary in the beginning, a well-established maître at the end, and a Stalinist opportunist in the middle. My purpose is to critically address

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the clichéd understanding of this second period as an ideological breakdown resulting in betrayal, "fall, and surrender", whether willing or forced by circumstances. Without taking sides in the discussion of the complicated ethics and motives of his behavior, I propose instead to look for those conditions of continuity that presented, or did not present, themselves under that infamous time, and how Shklovsky made use of those conditions, if those did indeed exist. For this purpose, I will have to rethink the notion of continuity itself and look into how Shklovsky himself, during that time of danger and disruption, constructed innovative forms of time and an anachronic non-linear history. I am making this attempt starting with this period of in-betweenness following his own principle as he himself advised beginning authors: if you do not know how to start your story, start from the middle, *in medias res*. Both the beginning and the end would take care of themselves later (Šklovskij 1930, 24).

## VIKTOR SHKLOVSKY IN THREE EPISODES OF REMEMBRANCE

The narrative of Shklovsky's long life already during his lifetime settled down into a tripartite composition. It starts with the story of the young "early" Shklovsky: the leader of the revolutionary avantgarde and the pioneer of literary theory to end with the old, "late" Shklovsky, by the end of his life the only living remainder of the glorious past, a fossilized specimen in the imaginary museum of Soviet literature. In between these two ages, that of the revolutionary and that of the museal Shklovsky, there lie a couple of decennia of the compromise: those probably even quite sincere attempts to accommodate to the Stalinist symbolic order; the sins the young generation of post-Stalinist maximalists could not forgive him until the very end and that even nowadays, almost forty years after his death, make his writings from those years not so easily publishable. In the eyes of the enthusiasts of the Thaw, Shklovsky came to serve as *the* embodiment of the Soviet intelligentsia's voluntary servitude, disgraced with its "fall and surrender" to the Stalinist regime: As a younger friend, colleague and student described him, "…The great and bitter sinner of Russian literature, whose every new book cancelled the previous one, an ever-smiling man hanging in between the lie and the half-truth […] This man assumes that his time is always right: both when he commits errors and when he confesses them." (Belinkov, Belinkova 2008, 305) Still, another friend and younger colleague was recollecting in his memoirs how he once had to say no to Shklovsky's request to help him publish a book by serving as its editor. The man knew that Shklovsky desperately needed this publication, the first officially allowed one after Stalin's death. Still, out of principle, the young man refused, arguing that the edition would not contain Shklovsky's most valuable and genuine work from the 1920s but included only later pieces from the 1930-40s that were not, in the young man's opinion, worthy of the master (Čudakov 1990). Thus, Shklovsky found himself under the double pressure of infamy: suffered not only under Stalin's political terror and censorship campaigns, but also afterwards, during that short period of relative relief after Stalin's death, the time Akhmatova aptly described as "vegetarian". Even in his very old age in the Brezhnev 70s and 80s, he had to live in the double shadows fearing police surveillance, on the one hand, and the public's condescending neglect, on the other. (On the atmosphere of fear, suspicion, and surveillance surrounding Shklovsky in Moscow in 1978, see Vitale 2012, 19–47.) Among those infamous pieces he produced during his Stalinist period, the best known, even though not necessarily correctly read, is his anti-formalist and (self-)accusatory essay from 1930 "The Monument to a Scientific Error" that with time became, indeed, a monument to an error committed by Shklovsky himself when he undertook to produce it, filling it with "self-critical" accusations against himself and denouncing not only formalism as such but also, personally, his comrades the formalists; an error that has remained unforgivable: "the bitter sin", to quote Shklovsky's nemesis Belinkov again.

The uncertainty about the way, degree, and sincerity of Shklovsky's engagement in Stalin's socialist construction is nowadays described with the equally uncertain attribute "controversial". Accusers never forgive him for his collaboration with the "Chekists" while apologists point out his role in protecting colleagues under repression, including Belinkov himself, and his attempts to save his brother in the Gulag as the main motive. The notorious episode among many other controversial ones is, of course, Shklovsky's participation in the Belomor Canal project, both as a participant in the GPU-organized grand tour of 120 Soviet writers and later, as author and editor in the writer's "brigade", also led and co-authored by the GPU, planning, composing, editing, and promoting the no less ideologically important and voluminous collection of essays dedicated to the history of the construction (Ruder 1998, 56–58 and 106–110). In this episode myth and history mix so tight as to almost obscure any differentiation, in part, thanks to Shklovsky himself who took care of creating, as many of his contemporaries and "synchronists" also did, an envelope of enigma around his own actions. His often-quoted anecdote about himself surrounded by prisoners and armed guards and therefore feeling like "a live silver fox in a fur store", could equally well apply to how he felt about being at some point read by unforgiving readers like Belinkov or Solzhenitsyn. Witnessed by another memoirist, in a fleeting conversation directly after he returned from the canal trip, Shklovsky described his experience differently; "[it was] scarier than at the war" (*strašnee, chem na vojne*, Gerštejn 1998, 35). Whether this excuses his collaboration, is a question, especially since, to repeat, what his collaboration was, is still unknown, and besides, the borderline between collaboration and non-collaboration is never objectively given.

## INVENTING THE PRESENT: "A REVOLUTIONARY CHOICE OF THE PAST"

Not as a joke but as a legitimate narratological reality, Shklovsky's idea of starting from the middle predates post-structuralist theories of anachrony that were developed by Gerard Genette for narratology in the 1980s and later taken over in critical theory by Jacques Derrida and Jacques Ranciére. In this connection we cannot but sympathize with his complaints as an old man about how belated, insufficient, and incorrect the acknowledgement of his early ideas was in Western theory (Šklovskij 2002). But also at home, in his old age, he found himself in inner alienation both from his literary and theoretical surroundings in Moscow and from structuralism that had just started penetrating the Soviet intellectual mainstream. Disappointed and jealous, he denounced Kafka, Fellini, Antonioni, Jakobson's language science and structuralist theory in general, rejecting all of those just "games of tennis without a ball", that is, without life, memory, or sense (Šklovskij 1970, 355–369).

There is however a meaningful point in common between Shklovsky and post-structuralist critical theory. After Nietzsche, on different grounds and with different perspectives, all of them suggest a rethinking of the shape of time: to break up with the chronological order of causes and effects and to elaborate an anachrony, that is, the mobilization of the past from the point of view and in the interests of the present. As early as 1924, Shklovsky was thinking about the relevance of the past and opposed *sovremennost'* (contemporality) to the formal chronological coincidence of events, *sinkhronnost'* (synchronicity). As distinct from the "synchronists" (*sinkhronisty*), those who are "contemporal" (*sovremenniki*, contemporaries) are relevant in the present independent of their dates of birth and death:

> I read my name in *Russkii sovremennik* [*The Russian Contemporary*, a literary magazine] next to the names of Abram Efros, Koz'ma Prutkov and still another classic.
>
> And then, I wrote a letter to *Russkii sovremennik*.
>
> In that letter, I expressed my surprise concerning the fact that I turned out to be a contemporary of Tiutchev and Prutkov. I did not deny the fact itself, but categorically protested the idea of myself being synchronous with Abram Efros and Khodasevich and explained this as a mere illusion of chronology. (Šklovskij 2018, 508, translation mine. – I.S.)

Writing this in 1924, he was still joking, but he meant what he was saying. In 1930, when he published in Literaturnaia gazeta what is generally believed to be the manifesto of his surrender, the infamous "Monument to a Scientific Error" ("Pamjatnik naučnoj ošibke", Šklovskij 2018, 871–878), there was already considerably less space for joking. 1932-1934 were the years of his Belomor epic, the enigmatic story of the Belomor Canal expedition(s) and the publication of the book followed by its immediate withdrawal from circulation. The chronicle of Shklovsky's infamy was rolling on. In the year 1937 which proved fatal for so many around him, he produced another controversial witticism, that time against "the first generation" of Soviet writers (Šklovskij 2018, 914–929). By "the first generation" he meant himself and his own circles of the OPOIAZ and LEF where he had acted as an intellectual leader in inspiration, organization, and promotion. Quite infamously, again, he slipped in critical comments against "the first generation" as if on behalf of Gorky, not himself. Wittingly or unwittingly, in these essays like in many other publications, part of which has still not been recovered, he was siding with those who had unleashed anti-formalist harassments, if not indirectly supporting repressions. It is possible that he was hoping such interventions could prevent the situation from taking an even worse turn, but in fact, they lost him many lifelong friendships and left him with a lasting reputation as a renegade. To which accusations, when confronted directly, he responds as truthfully as he can: "This is true, I do betray Yurii [Tynianov]. Boria [Eichenbaum]? – betray him, too. … [Lydia] Ginzburg? – he made a grimace – I do betray her a little – I love her very much and betray her just a tiny little bit." (Ginzburg 2002, 415; translation mine. – I.S.)

When in 1937, he criticized "the first generation" for being allegedly incapable of making "a revolutionary choice of the past", this sounded indeed as foul play. Still, one cannot exclude that Shklovsky really meant what he was saying, even if he was saying it at the terribly wrong moment in time and context. "The old world must be revised", Shklovsky declared, again pretending it was a quote from Gorky, "closing our eyes and believing that it (the old world) does not exist would be a cowardly lie". "A revolutionary choice of the past", "a choice made within one's history" is necessary if we are "to understand the future as a plan" (Šklovskij 2018, 922). In terms of its rhetoric, such a project of "revising the old world" would appear to fully coincide with Stalin's own revision of history as he would very soon formulate it in the *Concise Course*. At the same time, Shklovsky was here revising not the old world, but his earlier idea of history for the purposes of the present, as he had first developed it in his 18th-century literary historical research from the late 1920s and later in his historical fiction for grown-ups and children. All of these attempts in different genres, including those that evolved out of necessity when theory and criticism were effectively banned, were supported by the same fundamental principle: that of contemporaneity resulting from the *choice* of history as opposed to the passive synchronicity of coinciding with the mainstream. "The revolutionary choice" of the past should produce a genuine continuity instead of the false totality of "chronological illusions". Without a "feeling of choice in one's own history", there is "no feeling of how the past can be overcome and used." (Šklovskij 2018, 922)

The fog of ambiguity that envelopes his persona during his time under Stalin has not dispersed even nowadays;

not without a shadow of a doubt, we are trying to decide: those chiasmatic revisions of the past, are they the silver fox' maneuvers covering his own tracks, or a Nietzschean drawing those horizontal eights of eternal return? Should we believe the old man seeking an old truth he once betrayed? Should we read his "Monument to a Scientific Error" as a piece of Aesopian speech used to conceal revolutionary inventions under a false façade; should we believe him willing to reaffirm that old truth by reversing the act of betrayal itself? Or, still another possibility, should we, again, take seriously his historical experience and his attempts at preserving art and himself as an artist, even forced to make public accusations and self-accusations, to reverse these gestures of apostasy later and to transform them into new affirmations of art as "the negation of self-negation", as he formulated to parody the law of dialectics?

A formula like the "revolutionary choice of the past" for the understanding of "the future as a plan" might pass off in 1937 as a piece of dialectics, but equally well as a sample of pseudo-dialectic rhetorical mimicry. However, there is no dialectical synthesis in his formula, no sublation in which, according to Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism, the two conflicting opposites could transgress their mutual conflict by uniting into a positive totality of a third, superior instance. Shklovsky's is a negative dialectic, the opposition of "the past to be chosen" vs. "the future to be planned" not culminating in any superior positivity. Even though formulated in his typically good-naturedly affirmative tone, the past still remains open to choice, the future, to planning that does not necessarily mean implementation. His incomplete dialectics often appears in the form of syntactic inversion, chiasmus: a figure of infinity without the final synthesis into a non-contradictory and non-conflictual product. Chiasmus became an especially meaningful and productive device during his late years which he dedicated to the rereading of his early theory and re-formulating old theses with new arguments, new materials, and out of new historical experiences. In these re-readings, he re-affirms the significance of earlier theses and concepts by reversing their formulas. The "similarity of the dissimilar", the cornerstone of *ostranenie* and his early theory of prose transforms into the "dissimilarity of the similar" in the subtitle of his later book *The Bowstring* (*Tetiva: O neskhodstve skhodnogo,* Šklovskij 1970). The opposite ends of the chiasmus not simply reverse, but the act of reversal itself there reveals an underlying complex dynamic of mutual attraction/repulsion. In chiasmus, the law of arithmetic fails: from the changing of the order factors, there results a dramatic change in the product. Similarly, his infamous "Monument to a Scientific Error" in which he denounced both himself, his comrades, and their common cause, returns many years later in the title of his last book (Šklovskij 1983), that he dedicated to a new revision of OPOIAZ theories of the plot and the novel. Here, the theory of literature develops into an original philosophy of time, a theory of history and historical subjectivity. The destructive impact of (self-)denial and (self-)punishment for imaginary scientific errors confessed under duress transforms into a positive counterpart, the "energy of errancy"[1]: the driving force of human experience, historical knowledge, and artistic creation.

## *MOTALKA*: CHIASMUS, ANACHRONY, INFINITY

According to Marx, repetition is the nightmare of revolution; according to Shklovsky, recognition is the automatization of vision: there is a striking similarity between the two principles, both rejecting reproduction for the sake of revolutionary creation. As if to contradict his own principle, Shklovsky starts his creative artistic work as a young man by writing a book of memoirs, an amazing literary documentation of war and revolution, *A Sentimenal Journey*. Later, he reiterates almost the same tales and characters from his past almost obsessively in every new book: repetition becomes a matter of principle, or, as he formulates in one of his letters to the grandson, "How to repeat without repeating oneself": how to move on without fully rejecting what one leaves behind. Once again, this formula of repetition without self-repetition has a chiasmatic structure: without self-repetition, a repetition of the past becomes something new. A practical implementation of this principle for Shklovsky the film-maker is represented in the primitive film editing machine, *motalka*, a Russian version of the American moviola, the editing table. Film editing, and especially the re-editing of other people's films for demonstration in Soviet film theaters, became Shklovsky's predominant occupation during the 1930s when literature and the literary theory started being dangerous. *Motalka* was designed to allow the editor to cut and paste the image simultaneously moving the celluloid strip back and forth between the two plates or simply holding the film in the hands. By reversing the order in the sequence of stills, *motalka* was also reversing the temporality of the represented event. A simple trick of rolling the film backwards added new meanings to the same sequence and effectively disrupted the logic of cause and effect. *Motalka* is an economical and effective machine of anachrony demonstrating practical possibilities in film's power over time accelerating or slowing it down, making jumps into the future, or turning the time's course. The chiasmatic principles of the back-and-forth and the non-repetitive repetition produced a critical interplay of similarity/dissimilarity. A paradoxical and complex temporality appeared without any complicated technology, just in a piece of primitive film editing equipment. A practical negation of historical determinism and the very idea of historical necessity that dominated the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist doctrine and artistic practice under the banner of Socialist Realism.

1 I am suggesting *errancy* as a more appropriate equivalent for *zabluzhdenie*, instead of *delusion* in the English language edition.

*Motalka* disrupts hegemony in the idea of historical law and deconstructs the historical logic of cause and effect with historical time in the form of linear progress of time: these emerge as "chronological illusions", as instances of apparent "synchronicity" as opposed to the genuine "contemporaneity" Shklovsky suggested in 1924. But merely playing such tricks was not enough. In the early days of cinema, with the invention of montage, silent film was especially creative inventing similar attractions (Eisenstein's *attraktsiony*) both for entertainment and propaganda, which brought about domination by the aesthetics that Shklovsky described as "baroque": fragmentariness, contrast, and the preeminent importance of the detail (Šklovskij 2018, 932–935). In the 1930s, with the arrival of film sound, technologies became much more subtle and complex compared to silent cinema, due to the difficulties of synchronizing image with sound montage in a coherent rather than fragmented whole. Now, montage was applied not to produce a reality falling apart into a multitude of conflicting details, but to construct a spectacle of a coherent totality in which the flow of time would also be coherent and uninterrupted.

The avant-garde sensibility of conflict and detail was now passé, human perception changing with technology. In *Sentimental Journey*, Shklovsky summed up post-WW1 sensibilities in an autobiographic image of a man holding a grenade that explodes in his hands. This is a representation of historical experience under extreme political violence, the human figure at the moment of explosion allegorically depicting a modern subjectivity in conditions of total destruction (to remind, Shklovsky's impressions of the Gulag during his trip to the Belomor Canal, was that this latter was still even "scarier".) An explosion in the face of the subject surrounded by darkness and emptiness, probably, a description of his own sensations of brain concussion, appears to have been borrowed from the book of Genesis, the look of the earth before Creation, "without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep." (Gen 1:2) This is a metaphor of human condition in anachrony: a mind that is incapable of cohering in a time that is falling apart. In the end, there remain only two instances that effectively cohere: on the one hand, "the coherent consciousness of the communists", and on the other, insanity (Šklovskij 2008, 159). And yet, his journey through the explosion of darkness and emptiness is a sentimental one, and all sentimental stories end with the victory of good over evil. Thus, Shklovsky also ends his book with a positive note of faith and hope, when his autobiographic protagonist comes to the understanding of the ineradicability of life and time, even if all consistency and coherence are blown up and ultimately disrupted; there always remains a chance that at the end, even out of revolution's biblical formlessness, darkness, and emptiness, the exploded past would grow back again to transgress the trauma and to continue in the form of new history – or a new anachrony. This is as inevitable, as the return of life after winter is over; so, just like in spring, "last year's oats grow through an old bast shoe" left to rot in the dirty road last autumn, so will Russian culture grow new green shoots from under the rubbles of imperial history (Šklovskij 2008, 273).

And indeed. In the early 1930s, new stability seemed to have settled in, the revolutionary trauma to have healed, and the arrival of sound in the film to have announced new sensibilities in the revolutionary audiences. Shklovsky put forward this thesis quite forcefully in his speech at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, which his former allies, again, interpreted as just another step down the staircase of betrayal. *Sviaznost'* (coherence and consistency) was now his motto of the day: artistic production needs to cohere with the sensibilities of the proletarian audience, to be comprehensible to the new hegemonic class in the new world of socialism. This new filmgoer and book reader had not attended imperial gymnasiums and universities as the Shklovsky circle and generation had done. This was the reason why workers and soldiers experienced the school-book classics of Russian imperial culture as something excitingly new; its masterpieces as well as their common places were to this new consumer something unheard of and never seen. *Ostranenie* as a literary device had nothing left to do on this cultural front: the audiences were ignorant, and therefore, already by their origin and by default estranged from culture. A new coherence that the new consumer demanded was in Shklovsky's earlier formulation, essentially, a "chronological illusion", but as a master of film montage and re-montage, he knew not only how to deconstruct, but also how to manufacture new illusions of coherent and logically consecutive totalities. Thus, even though rejecting the "baroque" aesthetics of critical non-coherence in dialectical montage, he knew that coherence, consistence, and comprehensibility were not to be expected ready and waiting out there like new oats growing on a dirty road. As effects of "chronological illusions", all these were to be professionally produced, handled, and distributed, like any other kind of manufactured goods in the political economy of socialist commodities. In this respect, *motalka* proved a productive principle and a simple but reliable tool in synthesizing "chronological illusions" just as before it had been useful in their demystification.

Shklovsky's "voluntary servitude" in propaganda does not in any way diminish the truth in his empirical observation of the change of sensibilities around the turn of the decade. Similar changes were also reflected elsewhere, for instance, by the leftist intellectuals in Weimar Germany, by the surrealists in Paris, or in Mussolini's Italy where fascist audiences and critics were admiring Soviet realist painting and film. It was indeed a new generation that in the 1930s demanded political and historical reality to be self-evident, transparent, coherent, and explainable: a collective request from below that reflected on the ideas of historical and artistic truth in representation. Early Soviet cinematography, and especially newsreels and compilation films, had prepared the collective imaginary and the new socialist vision for the perception of such truths. By the time of the arrival of sound, filmic illusion based

on the attractions of dialectical montage had already stopped being either entertaining or convincing. However, the new audiences' demands for easy understandability in practice required a greater complexity in cinematic techniques in the synthesis of the double illusionism of visual and sound montage to achieve the effect of a realistic film image. To this paradox of increased "realness" through reduplicated illusionism, Shklovsky responded not by rejecting but by expanding the concept of montage. What he rejected was the fetishism of the detail in the silent film's aesthetics of the "baroque". In his view, *any* montage is conflict, and realistic montage especially, since what happens n the act of editing is not simply the cut-and-paste itself, but also additional procedures of toning down and harmonizing the effects of cutting and pasting. Thus, realistic editing turned out even more conflictual than Eisenstein's and Vertov's dialectical montage, especially when this former "pretends" to be chronological, because, Shklovsky maintained, chronology, like any sequence, also contains an inner conflict that needs to be pacified, and so does synchrony (which, as we remember is fake contemporaneity). Moreover, not only film that is engendered by montage but so is even life itself: "Everything in life is of *montazh* (*vsjo v zhizni montazhno*), one only must find out, on what principle […] The world is of *montazh* (*montazhen*). This we discovered when we began to paste film together." (Šklovskij 1983, 443 and 446) Not film alone, but all life and the world itself both require "editing" because human perception is fragmentary; "editing", however, is fundamentally artwork and therefore cannot be performed without critical artistic consciousness.

## AGAINST DENIAL: THE NEGATION OF THE PAST

His neighbor Vladimir Lifshits, a poet well-known for his arrogant literary falsifications, reports Shklovsky once saying about himself: "I don't lie *that* much; I invent." (*Ia vru malo, ia vydumyvaiu,* Šklovskij 2004, 360) *Vrat'* and *vydumyvat'* are close synonyms, but Shklovsky montages them together in the same phrase to make a slight, but significant difference visible. *Vrat'* means to lie thoughtlessly, *vydumyvat'* is to actively use one's intellect in fantasy and invention. Yet again, this *vydumyvaiu* is ambiguous: it has the connotations of infantile innocence (*vydumyvat'* is a verb to describe a child fantasizing) or the thinking of an engineer designing (*vydumyvat'*) new (artistic) devices, and maybe even innovative means of protection and rescue when history suddenly blows up right into the subject's face.

This idea of "*vrat' malo*" – which does not at all mean 'to tell the truth' -- he probably expressed best in the opening fragments of his first book of memories, theory, and criticism he was allowed to publish after Stalin's.

> There have been many memoirs already published, but the past in them looks too fancy. My childhood is not fancy.
>
> In Pomialovskii, a good author, there is a character who asks himself: "Where are those linden trees under which I was growing up?" And then replies to himself: "No such linden trees exist, nor have they ever existed".
>
> People publish a lot of memoirs nowadays, but people love their past and decorate it with flowers and traditional lindens.
>
> But I will be writing without lindens (*bez lip*). Thus, I will write directly (*priamo*). (Šklovskij 1966, 9; translation mine. – I. S.)

As if to undermine his own commitment to "speak directly", these "*lipy*" (linden trees) have a double bottom: not only as a commonplace cliché used in too many sentimental childhood memories by too many insincere memoirists, but also in the sense of the Russian prison slang expressions *lipa* (forged document or identification), and *lipovyi* (counterfeit).

Shklovsky is both an attractive and dangerous character with this seductive manner of his speaking wisdom in the form of witty ambiguities while at the same time insisting that he expresses himself "directly", *priamo*. Yet, in making such statements he is not "lying *that* very much", if we accept that his *priamo* has the shape of *motalka*, a horizontal "eight" signifying infinity, a critical chiasmus that never sublates, nor resolves his analyses into a definitive and final synthesis. He invents, instead, economical formulas that allow things to remain suspended in dynamic indecision, subject to individual choice: among other things, the past, the object of "the revolutionary choice" in the present for inventing "the future as a plan". This suspension is, indeed, direct, in the sense that the dilemma it produces, or the ambiguity that demands a solution to be found, aims directly at the reader encouraging her to make that choice, whether revolutionary or reactionary, and to assume full responsibility for the consequences. Other writers prefer to conceal the necessity of a choice in the protective shade of fictional "traditional lindens". Shklovsky's generation – Tynianov, Eichenbaum, Polivanov, Iakubinskii -- were busy doing something else: theirs was "a movement of explorers, not followers. […] We negated the old, but we never renounced it. There is a big difference there." (Sklovsky 1970, 41, translation from the English edition modified. – I.S.).

The point of "the revolutionary choice" is to negate, not to deny: to negate without falling into denial means being able to look the past in the eyes directly, to acknowledge and respect its complexity, to develop historical awareness against the trivialization of history through apparently crystal clear and fully comprehensible ready-made continuities and coherences that more often than not prove to be mere "chronological illusions". This is a critical strategy developed under infamous conditions, a strategy of operating against all odds, including being punished by disgrace in the eyes of the younger generations, and

yet, without "linden trees" but also without sacrificing Russian culture and history in cancellation.

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