

RICHARD SHELDON

Reply to Victor Erlich

Victor Erlich cites the memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam. Those memoirs establish credentials that no one can challenge, but Mrs. Mandelstam's view of the twenties is not acceptable to me. How can one speak about the "Soviet intellectual of the twenties," a concept so broad that it blurs essential distinctions. One fact demonstrates the bias of her account. In the 1,500 pages of her two-volume memoir, with its running commentary on Soviet intellectual life during the twenties, one name is never mentioned: Zamiatin.

Yet Professor Erlich talks willingly about the "moral emptiness" of Soviet intellectuals and their "inward confusion and mounting uncertainty as to the timeliness and historical viability of political and cultural freedom." Comments of that type may apply to Gorky, but they have nothing to do with Zamiatin or Shklovsky. Both of them thought that freedom was timely and viable. The problem was not inward but outward: a ruthless and all-powerful regime determined to silence heretics.

Professor Erlich observes that Shklovsky, cocky in 1923, was less cocky in 1926, and less cocky still in 1930. Does that indicate moral emptiness and inward confusion, or does it indicate that less was permitted in 1926 and 1930 than in 1923? Anything too bold for the censor was simply removed, as in the instance of the 1929 edition of *Sentimental Journey*. Nor should we be too surprised that the memoirs Shklovsky published in Moscow during the 1960s are less fiery than those he published in Berlin during the 1920s. Even so, *Zhili-byli* is not all that conventional. The fourth installment (*Znamia*, November 1961), with its pointillist evocation of the civil war, still contained too many dead horses. The publication of subsequent installments was stopped for more than a year and, when *Zhili-byli* appeared in book form in 1964, the whole installment was missing. The second edition happened to coincide with a more lenient period—1966 (Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, Kuznetsov's *Babii-Iar*, Solzhenitsyn's "Zakhar-Kalita"). That edition contains the fourth installment, with some of the more objectionable sentences deleted. None of this has much to do with moral emptiness and inward confusion.

Applying such generalizations to Shklovsky, Professor Erlich attributes the disarray in *Sentimental Journey* to a "sudden collapse of unexamined ideological assumptions." What strikes him as "honest confusion" there, burgeons into the more massive and repugnant disarray of *Third Factory*.

But what are these collapsing unexamined ideological assumptions? The disarray in *Sentimental Journey* is the response of an individual struggling against the cataclysmic forces unleashed by revolution and civil war—forces that neither he nor any other individual seemed able to control. Buffeted by those forces, Shklovsky seized gratefully upon fractions as the one sure thing. The disarray in *Third Factory* is unrelated to the disarray in *Sentimental Journey*. *Third Factory*, wholly different in mood, contains the response of an individual who has just discovered that he cannot find refuge in emigration, and who must find some way to live under a regime that he now knows will not tolerate his “ideological assumptions,” which were, incidentally, not only thoroughly examined but also thoroughly cherished. The difference between the disarrays in those two books is fundamental.

The Stalin era was evil beyond computation. Even the best people sometimes faltered. Eikhensbaum, whose silence Professor Erlich prefers, took fewer risks than Shklovsky and he was not silent in 1948. Like Shklovsky, D. S. Mirsky wrote the required article condoning the purges and so did Babel, who had mastered the art of silence (*Literaturnaia gazeta*, January 26, 1937). Mandelstam wrote his ode to Stalin, though the Mandelstams were lucky enough to have no children. Akhmatova was not so lucky. Neither was Shklovsky. It was not “inner confusion” and “mounting uncertainty as to the timeliness and viability of political and cultural freedom” that made those terrible things happen.

In 1937, Shklovsky was being pilloried for the film of *The Captain's Daughter* made from his screenplay. That was not the best time for him to help the Mandelstams. But Professor Erlich tells us that we should not confuse personal decency with intellectual defiance. On the contrary. What Shklovsky did for the Mandelstams cannot be dismissed as “mere” decency. In the Soviet Union of the year 1937, personal decency entailed intellectual defiance.

The late forties took their toll, however, as Shklovsky's book *Zametki o proze russkikh klassikov* (1953 and 1955) shows. It is Shklovsky's ode to Stalin, if you like, but let us remember that it is a product of those nightmare postwar years, when Shklovsky, as Jew and incorrigible cosmopolite, lived every moment under the ax—especially after his rash defense of Veselovskii in 1947. We gain some insight into those pressures from the title of an article in *Uchitel'skaia gazeta* (March 19, 1949): “Naglaia knizhonka kosmopolita Shklovskogo”—a belated tirade against Shklovsky's 1928 book about *War and Peace*.

Instead of dwelling on *Zametki*, we should consider Shklovsky's achievements since the Thaw. His *Khudozhestvennaia proza* (1959 and 1961), transformed into *Povesti o proze* in 1966, is a rich and exciting book that

moves beyond the hermetic *Theory of Prose*. Shklovsky's book on Dostoevsky (1957) was enthusiastically reviewed by Roman Jakobson (*International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics*, nos. 1 and 2 [1959]) and appreciatively cited by Donald Fanger and Edward Wasiolek in their books on Dostoevsky. Shklovsky's monumental biography of Tolstoy, now successfully translated into French, has been praised by Kathryn Feuer for its "great originality," "richness," and "startling insights" (*Russian Review*, April 1969). In 1970, at the age of seventy-seven, Shklovsky published *Tetiva*, one of his most brilliant and provocative books. Peter Demetz, writing in *Die Zeit* (August 17, 1973) regretted only that the German translation had been abridged, while the reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* (October 15, 1971) spoke about the book as the "champagne of criticism."

Professor Erlich sums up his case as follows: the habit of intellectual timidity that Shklovsky had acquired by 1930 continues to manifest itself. I have tried to show why I reject that position. The books published by Shklovsky in the last twenty years have found an enthusiastic international audience. What draws readers to his books is not intellectual timidity.