



PROJECT MUSE®

Strange Revolution: Viktor Shklovsky and the Formalism of
Feeling

Wendi Bootes

New Literary History, Volume 56, Number 4, Autumn 2025, pp. 691-716
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2025.a988543>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/988543>

Strange Revolution: Viktor Shklovsky and the Formalism of Feeling

Wendi Bootes

Abstract: This essay unearths the empiricist epistemology underwriting Viktor Shklovsky's early formalist theory, and argues that it provides a fundamental and largely unacknowledged link to the eighteenth-century tradition of sentiment. I contend that his call for attunement to the strangeness of relations is premised on a renewed encounter with sensibility indebted to the self-reflexive configuration of the sentimental novel. Excavating this genealogy reveals that *ostranenie*, or estrangement, is not simply a revivification of the world, but an instrument of feeling. Shklovsky's revolutionary memoir, *A Sentimental Journey* (1923), which I consider in the last section of this essay, models the epistemic potential of sentimental aesthetics under some of the most extreme conditions of existence: revolution and war.

Искусство в основе иронично и разрушительно.
Он оживляет мир.

Art is fundamentally ironic and destructive. It
revitalizes the world.

—Viktor Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey*, 1923

IN 1922, IN THE FAMINE-STRICKEN and war-ravaged rubble of post-revolutionary Petrograd, amidst the collapsed ruins of the former Russian empire, Viktor Shklovsky proclaimed the destructive potential of art. His polemical statement echoes the provocations made throughout his generically recalcitrant set of revolutionary reflections, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs 1917-1922* (*Sentimental'noe puteshestvie: Vospominaniia 1917-1922*), a formally vertiginous collection blending theory and memoir. If the destruction notable in the context of civil war is due to an encounter with art, rather than the more obvious material immiseration, then the power of the aesthetic is potent indeed. And in fact, over the course of a decade, from the years preceding the First World War through to the mid-1920s, he repeatedly returned to this

conviction in the power of the aesthetic to remake the world anew. In the continual dynamic of annihilation and regeneration promised by an encounter with certain literary forms, he saw the revelatory potential for reinvigorated attention to one's surroundings. To his mind, the forms capable of provoking such a cognitive reorientation were literary devices (*priemy*) that were self-consciously made visible as such, through techniques such as digression, repetition, and deceleration (*zamedlenie*, also translated as retardation). These difficulties of form, in Shklovsky's account, constitute the grounds for perceptual renewal.

The emphasis here on perception is key, and the question of its vigor provides the motivation for much of Shklovsky's theoretical work during the late imperial and early Soviet era. The animating thread that runs through his work to denaturalize objects and institutions constitutes a push from a secondary order of functions—the set of associations and assumptions entailed in recognition (*uznavanie*)—back to the primary moment of cognition, or what he repeatedly calls seeing (*videnie*).¹ The most famous operation of Russian formalism, *ostranenie* (variously translated as “estrangement” or “defamiliarization”), emerges at the heart of this dynamic, and its effect is to render the world afresh for the reader, in all its novel strangeness.² Confronting estranging arrangements in poetry and prose, a reader experiences something like an empiricist reawakening, by which the idea in question is stripped to its barest fundamental details. In this paradigm, form is important because of its ability to revivify feeling, an affordance whose affective basis perhaps resonates oddly within a formalist legacy known to privilege autonomy and abstraction, particularly as this mode of critique has emerged out of its Anglo-American midcentury iterations. Yet one of the foundational logics of literary theory, from its origins in the crumbling Russian empire, remains an essentially embodied and materially oriented phenomenon, profoundly attached to the world as it stakes its power on the transformative capacity to provoke sensation.

Recognizing the fundamentally empiricist orientation of Shklovsky's early formalist theory provides the impetus to probe some of its intellectual debts to earlier philosophical traditions, a lineage somewhat belied by the formalists' tendency to loudly proclaim the radical novelty of their approaches. The so-called *formalisti*, a pejorative label given to—and subsequently adopted by—a motley assortment of energetic young philologists in Petrograd and Moscow, turned away from the biographical and historically descriptive tendencies that dominated fin-de-siècle Slavic literary studies. They took up a mantle of heterodox literary analysis that proclaimed the autonomy of literary work, even as their approaches themselves grew out of nineteenth-century philology

and historical-sociological methodology.³ Eager to define the contours of literariness (*literaturnost'*), early formalists attempted to establish a reliably scientific basis for analysis, an enterprise which of course assumes that there is, in fact, something identifiably unique about literary form. Embedded in the movement's aspirations to scientism (*nauchnost'*) was the provocative promise to uncover the operations and boundaries of any linguistically formed artistic endeavor: no less than to, in the words of Galin Tihanov, describe the "objective laws that govern human agency."⁴

The "scientific" impulse to identify and delimit the boundaries of literary phenomena retains a spectral presence in recent variants of literary reflection grouped under the wide umbrella of "new formalisms." To deliberate on the ontology of a literary text is an enterprise that—though it often goes largely unacknowledged—picks up on these key debates of early twentieth-century Russian and Eastern European formalists. In asking what might distinguish a lyric or a short story from other discursive artifacts, formally invested critical approaches mobilize a set of questions that was first systematically articulated by the two schools comprising the Russian formalist movement, *OPOYAZ* (*Obshchestvo izucheniia poeticheskogo iazyka*, or the Society for the Study of Poetic Language) and the Moscow Linguistic Circle. Even as conversations of the last few decades have mobilized wildly disparate understandings of the idea of form, the cyclical reinvigoration of formal commitments is indebted to this early moment in modern literary theory, as Galin Tihanov, Marijeta Bozovic, Ilya Kliger, and Boris Maslov have shown.⁵ Yet while current strands of formalist criticism grant, at the very least, a general sense of import to the particular contours and patterns of their objects (and indeed, a kind of simplified geometric vocabulary often surfaces in disciplinary arguments: Sandra Macpherson memorably asserts that form is simply "the shape matter ... takes"), the frequent generality of these shapes has a distancing effect at odds with the ostensible aim to probe their relevance.⁶ Indeed, a recent tendency toward extreme formal pluralism does away with the form-specificity of objects—aesthetic or otherwise—to consider the structures of social and political phenomena.⁷ In their 2017 article "Form and Explanation," Anahid Nersessian and Jonathan Kramnick contend that this contemporary promiscuity of form is salutary: the inability to impose a singular, coherent definition of "form" is a symptom of its continual relevance and adaptivity.⁸ It is thus to form's imprecision that we owe its animating impulse. Yet if this kind of radically inclusive approach to formalism is generous in its potential applications, it also elides the critical sharpness demanded by the methodology of early formalists, whose scientific approach encouraged definitional precision. What's more, it obscures the curious and foundational intimacy between

literary form as an object of inquiry and as a tool of sentiment, a relation which depends on the exacting operations of literary discourse.

It is to the methodological origin of modern literary theory that this essay wagers a return in order to illuminate its prehistories and, in so doing, elucidate early formalism's epistemological significance. To be sure, this archaeological impulse is one that has enjoyed some critical attention over the last few decades, as scholars have attempted to trace different historical origins for certain formalist insights, in particular Shklovsky's early thinking on prose form.⁹ My own approach finds the grounds of his analysis to be indebted to eighteenth-century philosophies of feeling, a lineage that reveals a founding modernist formalism that is far more affective, embodied, and socially oriented than is acknowledged by accounts that emphasize its scientific preoccupations.¹⁰ For Shklovsky, prose's formal patterns are significant because of the attunement they solicit: his formalism, as I read it, is concerned with what form *is* insofar as its qualities determine what it *does*. In emphasizing such active and material effects, this essay joins a vein of scholarship that draws out the sensory underpinnings of Shklovsky's formalist work, including Douglas Robinson and Anastasia Eccles.¹¹

My aim in this essay is twofold: first, to explore a largely under-appreciated intellectual genealogy of literary theory's founding formalism by drawing out its embedded empiricist assumptions. The empiricism undergirding Shklovsky's theorization of prose, premised on its ability to catalyze renewed operations of "feeling," finds a literary apogee in the sentimental tradition. Eighteenth-century performances of sentiment, led in the latter half of the century by the pioneering Laurence Sterne, provide an exemplary model of formalist innovation conducive to the estranging impulse extolled by Shklovsky. Formalism's and sentimentalism's shared preoccupation with sensibility as a means of knowing provides the conceptual grounds for the second part of this essay, which turns to Shklovsky's "sentimental" account of the collapse of the Russian empire and the rise of the Bolshevik state. Neither straight memoir nor theoretical treatise, but a curious and deeply disorienting hybrid, his text demonstrates the extremities of sentimental form at the limits of everyday experience: revolution and war.

In what follows, I first reconsider Shklovsky's best-known essay, "Art as Device" ("Iskusstvo kak priem"), in order to establish the empiricist epistemology at the core of his formal analyses. The imperative to denaturalize objects and institutions demands a retreat from a secondary order of functions—the set of associations and assumptions entailed in recognition—back to the primary moment of cognition. It is his essays on the structure of prose form, most notably "The Novel as Parody:

Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* ("Parodiinyi roman: *Tristram Shendi* Sterna"), that proffer a solution to this problem of perceptual enervation by way of a specifically "sentimental" literary structure. For Shklovsky, a heightened attunement to the interaction between primary cognition and secondary convention is achieved through the self-reflexive sentimental dynamic typified by Sterne, Shklovsky's literary idol and fellow provocateur. In tracing the sentimental roots of Shklovsky's formalist theory, I build on Eccles's consideration of the debt that Shklovsky's formalism owes to sentimental aesthetics. In her 2016 article, Eccles asserts that despite Shklovsky's apparent aversion to sentiment, he in fact absorbs its reliance on a set of tropes, including reflexivity and a "fantasy of sympathetic inhabitation."¹² I extend this thought by exploring the shared epistemic basis for theories of sentiment and estranged form, both of which foreground the primacy of perception. In their attunement to sensation, formalist narrative theory and accounts of sensibility posit that feeling is the basis for knowing, an epistemology that finds renewed purchase in the aftermath of imperial collapse. The empirical commitment of the sentimental journey is reflected in Shklovsky's own revolutionary version, which employs Sterne's self-reflexive, estranging prosaic forms to make visible the shattered relationality of revolution. In the breakdown of empire, in the absence of empiricist forces of habitude that govern causality, it is feeling that commands epistemic urgency.

Feeling Objects

In 1916, amidst the turmoil of the First World War, stationed in the barracks of the Petrograd garrison, Shklovsky penned what would become his most famous essay on the nature and purpose of art. "Art as Device" was published the subsequent year, in 1917, and it offered an expanded reformulation of a prior paper, "The Resurrection of the Word" ("Voskreshenie slova," 1914), delivered as a lecture in late 1913 at an avant-garde café and cabaret aptly named The Stray Dog. In the intervening years, Shklovsky cultivated a pattern of extreme polarities, whereby his urban intellectual life was punctuated with far-flung stints of manual and military labor. Within a span of months, he founded *OPOYAZ* and enlisted in the army as an armored car mechanic and instructor at the outset of the war. As he repaired cars and trained drivers in the last days before the February Revolution of 1917, he meditated on mechanics of a different sort—that of literary or poetic language, whose distinction from everyday language is one of the founding premises of Russian formalism. Perhaps fitting for someone scavenging makeshift

vehicle parts out of the rubble of the city, his focus in “Art as Device” is notably material, concerned with objects and our relationship to them. Devices, techniques, tools, apparatuses—the very language of his essay, filled with words of craftsmanship and purpose, emphasizes the *work* behind both art and the modes of perception it invites. Yet even as Shklovsky labors over the mechanics of armored cars, he remains overwhelmingly skeptical of mechanization as an experiential process. Customs and habits function, per his estimation, to render the world effectively invisible; faced with daily repetitive movements and familiar sights and sounds, we cease to truly perceive our surroundings. Indeed, it is objects—especially banal and domestic ones—that first fall victim to the deprivation of sensation. And it is such objects, in all their banality and domesticity, that Shklovsky seeks to revive from the perils of habitual, unnoticed functioning, a seemingly inevitable aspect of existence he characterizes as automatization (*avtomatizatsiia*).¹³

In fact, it all starts with a troublesome sofa. Consider one of the most frequently cited passages from this essay, which appears after he quotes an entry in Leo Tolstoy’s diary, wherein a contemplative Tolstoy ruminates on whether or not he dusted his sofa, and concludes that if he cannot remember, it as good as didn’t happen. This non-remembrance is a problem because, as Tolstoy extrapolates, it implicates a much broader issue with our psyche. The unconsciousness with which we carry out tasks as menial as sofa-dusting is an unsettling indication of our tendency to elide the experiential texture of being. Put simply, for Tolstoy, forgetfulness amounts to non-existence. Here Shklovsky intervenes, declaring:

And so, held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war.

If the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it’s as if this life had never been.

And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By “enstranging” objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and “laborious.” (*TP* 5–6)

The catalog of fading things offered by Shklovsky provides a telling suggestion that automatization threatens more than merely domestic objects. In proceeding decisively from clothes and furniture to wives and fear of war, his list gains in affective potency as the stakes likewise increase, suggesting that our very conditions of intimacy and emotion

are jeopardized. Tolstoy's possibly dusty sofa is, in fact, only a seemingly innocuous harbinger of a more ominous problem: what Shklovsky reveals here is no less than a crisis of perception, one that risks denuding our sensibilities regarding something as large and potentially abstract as war. Of course, in 1916 Petrograd, war was not an especially intangible concept, and so Shklovsky's suggestion that it remains in danger of passing into the level of unconsciousness is particularly provocative. Yet while the potential loss of something so consequential as "fear of war" seems resolutely immaterial, the power he invests in art is decisively of a material kind. If automatization, that is, threatens feelings, art restores not affects but sensations—a different kind of feeling, that of objects and the material qualities of experience, including our own embodiment (in the Russian, he writes *chtoby vernut' oshchushchenie zhizni*, to return the sensation of life). Habitude numbs our psyche, and art hands us a newly stonified stone.

The means by which art can enact such revivification is through a device Shklovsky famously labels *ostranenie*, variously translated as "defamiliarization," "estrangement," "making strange," and—in Benjamin Sher's awkward but perhaps more faithful rendering—"enstrangement." The word itself is a neologism, riffing off of the Russian word *otstranit'* (to remove or push aside); thus, it performs what it describes, causing the reader's eye to stumble over an unrecognized formulation that itself becomes imbued with strangeness. Aptly, then, the word is removed from convention and placed within a new linguistic context, eliciting a particular form of attention. Indeed, the attention *ostranenie* commands, both as a novel coinage and as a process of artistic defamiliarization, is very much the point. As Shklovsky outlines in this early essay, renewed attentiveness to the aesthetic object is required in order to fully apprehend it—not merely to recognize it (*uznavat'*), an act that he critiques as a result of automatization.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on this distinction between apprehension and recognition, pivotal as these concepts are throughout both the essay and his early formalism more broadly. Notably, there is no single word used by Shklovsky that corresponds to what I am calling "apprehension." The closest would be *videnie*, or "seeing," or *sozdanie osobogo vospriiatie*, literally "the creation of a special perception," but he primarily describes the desired phenomenon in negative terms—*against* recognition (translation mine). For Shklovsky, to apprehend suggests something like a first moment of intuition or impression. Primacy is key to this means of mentally laying hold of something; it is crucial that the idea in question is pared down to its empirical fundamentals, stripped of any potential secondary associations. In fact, what distinguishes

Shklovsky's aesthetic theory from its related precursors is this sustained emphasis on a return to the substance of things.¹⁴ Indeed, the priority given to sensory apprehension owes its force to the main tenets of empiricist philosophy, which posits an epistemology based entirely on acts of perception. Famously, John Locke's monumental *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) inaugurated the age of modern empiricism by radically challenging the rationalist orthodoxy of innate ideas. In seeking to establish how we come to have "ideas," or objects of understanding, his project limits the domain of human knowledge almost exclusively to that which is experienced and observed. David Hume's contributions decades later extend Locke's empiricist foundations to the grounds of ethical principles, while pushing them to more skeptical ends. His *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) addresses the origin of ideas, which he posits arise from impressions, the stronger of the two "perceptions of the mind."¹⁵ The crucial epistemological distinction for Hume is that between two kinds of propositions: "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact" (E 25). The former are grasped solely through intuition; such analytic *a priori* statements are confined to "the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain" (E 25). Hume's concern, however, lies overwhelmingly with the second category, "matters of fact," which comprise synthetic *a posteriori* propositions that are *not* discovered solely by operations of thought. These propositions, in their reliance on the "testimony of our senses," are founded on the "relation of *Cause and Effect*" (E 26; emphasis in original). It is this empirical domain of belief, entirely dependent on sensory testimony, which proves epistemically critical for Shklovsky's aesthetic theory; as we will see, such "matters of fact" describe the strange causality at work in his theoretical memoir.

In its preoccupation with materiality and conviction in the supremacy of sensation, Shklovsky's essay accords epistemic priority to immediate objects of perception; the true promise of art is to facilitate this encounter. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, recognition (*uznavanie*) is the lesser of the two cognitive functions, as it necessarily casts backwards to something seen already. Recognition is the imaginatively impoverished but ubiquitous phenomenon against which *ostranenie* is working, and it remains tellingly opposed to seeing.¹⁶ As such, we might think of recognition as an occasion of nonseeing, or perhaps *unseeing*, considering that this secondary form of sight is a diminution of the first. At the root of the empiricist psychology underwriting Shklovsky's formalist aesthetics lies an insistence on the radically unqualified power of the object: the "idea" in Lockean empiricist parlance reduced to its essential sensory data, unburdened by the adjectives and qualifiers that come with habitude and

familiarity. In the examples he provides, of holding a pen and speaking a foreign language, Shklovsky notes the drastic difference that separates the first and ten-thousandth times one engages in these activities. Repetition, in deadening the senses, mortifies experience—and if experience is the means by which we know things, the result is very dire indeed.

This is where art intervenes. Art's intercession, however, is not simply a matter of demanding our studied attention to the idea in question: the act of reduction to a primary impression is a necessarily complex operation. To return to my earlier emphasis on the importance of work, Shklovsky insists that the encounter with an idea facilitated by art is characterized by effort. Labor is an integral aspect of a text's literariness; the exertion required by *ostranenie* is not a means to an end, but rather part of the very point. Apprehension, in the grip of this methodology, is marked by a lack of ease: after all, the device of art increases the difficulty and length of perception. And while Shklovsky notoriously declares that the "estranged" object itself does not matter, objects are undeniably at the heart of formalism's formative paradigm—indeed, they are the regulating end of the entire operation. The reanimation occasioned by estrangement restores an object's specific *objectness*, and for Shklovsky this entails our primary sensations of the material thing, an explicitly somatic experience that harkens back to the Greek etymological root of aesthetics. Far from the depersonalized, aloof, and anti-sentimental methodology of later structuralist polemics, Shklovskian formalism is a deeply embodied account of the literary text, at the heart of which are people and their sensory relationships to the world around them.

In order to restore this material immediacy, prose must rupture our perceptual complacency. The device essay famously takes its initial examples from Tolstoy, whom Shklovsky regards as a master of soliciting apprehension over recognition. The short story "Kholstomer" (1886), told from the point of view of an eponymous horse, invites us to reflect on the artifice behind claims of ownership: "They [humans] have made a compact among themselves that only one person shall say 'my' to any one thing. And, in accordance with the rules of this game, he who could say 'my' about the greatest number of things would be considered to be the happiest of men" (*TP* 7). Here, Shklovsky's reading of Tolstoy relies upon an implicitly staged object-relations shift: from the clothing and stones with which he opens the essay, we move to a set of *relations* concerning such objects. The brilliance of "Kholstomer," for Shklovsky, is to make these implicit relations, obscured by custom and ubiquity, available for apprehension. Tolstoy's broader point, which Shklovsky identifies as a central problem driving *ostranenie*, is that we have naturalized the artificial and, what is possibly worse, occluded the very act of

doing so. Kholstomer's viewpoint allows us to see the Lockean "idea" before the category that we later impose upon it, a perspective afforded by the unique capacity of the text to frame the strangeness of the relation. Tolstoy's defamiliarization thus makes visible categories of relationality—such as property—that are pervasive but often imperceptible *as* categories. This, Shklovsky asserts, is the Tolstoyan "way of seeing things out of ... context," a descriptive mode that suffuses most of his work (*TP* 9). When we operate under the force of automatization, we grasp an entire network of connections and associations surrounding an idea, rather than apprehending it in its singularity. Here, Hume's associationism offers a framework for understanding how such automatic networks are formed. He notes that all ideas are organized within the mind with a necessary degree of "method and regularity," in accordance with three regulatory "principles of connexion": resemblance, contiguity (in time or place), and cause and effect (*E* 23-24). Hume's associationist theory foregrounds these principles as foundational to all causal inferences and moral judgments. Within the Shklovskian epistemology of pure perception, these principles are secondary, as they regulate our understanding by subsuming the "idea" within a pattern of contextual information established through prior experience and habit. To restore unmediated primacy to our encounter with the idea, then, Tolstoy's strategy of *ostranenie* depends on a critical dissociation of Humean principles.

Shklovskian estrangement, in all its varied and eclectic manifestations, is thus chiefly positioned against recognition. And yet the underlying epistemology at work is premised not just upon empiricist encounter, but *re*-encounter. Shklovsky's aim is to return us to our first moment of contact with an object of perception or thought, a move that presumes a primacy of apprehension that is, of necessity, both lost and restorable. In the process of this restoration of primacy, we come to understand our prior knowledge as false or incomplete: the categories we would ostensibly use to define the phenomena presented—property, opera, or Russian Orthodox ritual—are in fact inoperable. Shklovsky underscores that the power of *ostranenie* does not lie in generating ultimate resolution—he does not provide us with new, "proper" categories, for instance—but in this unique mode of unexpected, delayed perception, characterized as a newly developed mental "vision": "The purpose of the image is not to draw our understanding closer to that which this image stands for, but rather to allow us to perceive the object in a special way, in short, to lead us to a 'vision' of this object rather than mere 'recognition'" (*TP* 10). His examples suggest that to experience estrangement is to undergo an ethical reorientation, however small or seemingly inconsequential. And so, despite Shklovsky's initial emphasis on the material world of

objects that we risk losing to habitude—sofas, stones, and the like—the estranging literary moments upon which he lingers in this essay move beyond objects to implicate social conventions and political institutions, and to the relations underpinning them. When we are impelled to apprehend something in a “special way” (*osoboe vospriatie*), we unearth our implicitly held assumptions regarding how objects and people relate to each other in the process.

The Form of Sentiment

If the device essay poses the question of just how we come to know the things we claim to, the rest of the essays collected in *Theory of Prose* (*O teorii prozy*, 1925) explore the ways in which a narrative’s devices mediate our understanding of its content. Narration, as opposed to “poetic” language more broadly, here becomes the mode of knowing under investigation. As Shklovsky outlines, the emancipation from automatization is achieved primarily by a violation of norms: in fact, by his understanding, all plots, by necessity, involve a violation, as they distort the logic of a story. Across these essays, a latent tension evidenced in the device essay between order and disruption surfaces more apparently, pitting the push toward “scientific” regularity against the pull of narrative volatility, premised on deviation. Modern scientific methods, dependent on principles of iteration, standardization, and structure, appear somewhat incompatible with the emphasis on transgression evident throughout Shklovsky’s writing on prose form. To be sure, this can be partially attributed to Shklovsky’s own theoretical idiosyncrasies (he remains, arguably, one of the least systematic of the formalists). Yet more usefully, I think, we might recognize that this tension between method and its rupture is a constitutive feature of Shklovsky’s formalist approach. Estrangement, by interrupting the system of economy that motivates habitual perception, is a phenomenon occasioned by paradoxically anti-systematic methods, by techniques that aim to disrupt and contort. What emerges in his thought is an understanding of narrative systems that, when effectively deployed, are distinguished by their own norm-breaking. Even as Shklovsky identifies the coincidence of plot devices across cultures and historical periods—evidence, to his mind, of the existence of “special laws of plot formation” that are immanent to fictional texts—these structural paradigms must, if they are to successfully estrange the reader, be interrupted, distorted, or displaced (*TP*17). The result is a rather uneasy codification of formal rupture, a theory dependent on systematicity insofar as it is necessary to make narrative

violations legible as such. For Shklovsky, the true critical purchase of narrative form is its capacity to lift us out of the text and force us into renewed sensory contemplation. The formal relationships organizing texts may be methodical, but their success relies on challenging the automatization of everyday perception. Even so, not all narratives are equally estranging, and it is specifically forms that draw attention to themselves *as* forms that Shklovsky hails as superior at inviting estrangement. He famously calls this technique of deliberate transparency “lay[ing] bare the device” [obnazhenie priema], a label that foregrounds the importance of making visible (*TP* 147). This is where Sterne enters as a presiding influence on Shklovskian formalism, his prose being exemplary in its commitment to “laying bare” its own structure.

Sterne, the giant of late-eighteenth-century sentimentalism, is an ideal figure for probing the interaction between cognition and convention underlying Shklovsky’s model of narrative. The latter’s theory of prose finds in Sterne’s sentimental aesthetics the basis of both form and feeling: Sterne becomes the beating heart of the formalist theory of narrative composition via his abiding preoccupation with those twin grounds of empirical inquiry, experiment and experience. On the one hand, Sterne’s resolute eccentricity—his commitment to narrative experimentation and defiance of still-evolving literary norms—provides an irreverent paradigm of self-awareness that thwarts prosaic convention. Yet no less vital is his version of the sentimental encounter, premised on exaggerated displays of feeling and heightened attunement to sensory intimacy, an alignment that proves similarly crucial for Shklovsky’s formalist epistemology. The embodied attentions of *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) and the later *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768) highlight the empiricist basis behind the burgeoning discourse of sentiment in eighteenth-century British letters. Sterne’s prose, more than perhaps that of any other practitioner of sentimentalism, foregrounds the imbrication of the multiple connotations of “feeling”—emotional responsiveness, critical judgement, moral reflection, and perceptual sensitivity—in circulation at the time. “Feeling” describes affective attunement alongside sensory testimony, and in the roughly contemporaneous accounts of moral deliberation and action—culminating in Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) and Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)—it amounts to no less than an ethics of sensory attention.

Yet Sterne is no straightforward man of feeling. Both a pioneer and a parodist of sentimentalism, he developed the mode while overtly lampooning its solemnities and affective excesses. And as he played the role of sentimental provocateur, his work in turn altered the literary landscape. As James Chandler notes, *A Sentimental Journey* “effectively created

a new subgenre in fiction,” one largely refashioned from the genre of the picaresque.¹⁷ The dynamism between the parodic and earnest leveraging of sentiment is a crucial technique of readerly engagement for Sterne and later figures of literary sentimentalism who followed in his wake. Shklovsky’s own preoccupation with Sterne and his method of novelistic innovation is premised in large part on this (often humorous) approach to sentimental fiction, whose foundation rests on a deep sense of ambivalence. And so, even as Shklovsky eschews sentiment as suspect in terms of *content* (“sentimentality cannot constitute the content of art,” he polemicizes), he endorses the *structure* underpinning sentimental practice (*TP* 159). His revival of Sterne in the early Soviet Union is ostensibly predicated on a revelation of the novelist’s formal innovations: in a later essay in *Theory of Prose* on Vasily Rozanov, he quips that “*Sterne was appreciated in Russia only thematically*” (*TP* 203, emphasis in original). Thus positioned as the ambassador of true Sternean form in Russia, his discussion seeks to reveal the toolkit of compositional devices that comprise Sterne’s craft.¹⁸ As we will see, these mechanics depend on a sharp attunement to modes of affective ambivalence. The operations of feeling are inherently structural, as they rely on sympathetic inhabitation and perceptual alteration, maneuvers which invite a self-conscious awareness of the text as a vehicle of influence.

The dependency of feeling on the means of its narration is evident in the genealogy of the concept of sentiment. By the 1750s, several years prior to the first installments of *Tristram Shandy*, the word “sentimental” had acquired associations with a new kind of formal organization; as Chandler attests, it was seen as “a new way of producing narrative.”¹⁹ “Sentiment,” according to Samuel Johnson’s 1755 dictionary, is defined as “thought; notion; opinion.”²⁰ However, it also came to be understood as resulting from experience, as a description of something felt, rather than simply thought (proceeding from its Latin root *sentire*, or sensed). Indeed, one of the central preoccupations of the sentimental mode remains the varied intersections between knowledge and feeling: sentimental fiction, from its earliest iterations, takes seriously the epistemic potential of emotions or sensations. The ability of “sentiment” and the sentimental mode to activate a reader’s cognitive energies animates the development of such narratives. The term “sensible” itself came to connote a reader’s own sensitivity to a text: in contemporaneous discussions of sentimental fiction, “sensitivity” was used less to describe “the content of the novels [themselves],” and more to point to their “effect[s] upon ... reader[s].”²¹ So Samuel Richardson’s preface to the first edition of *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) describes the aim of his novel as moral edification of the “sensible reader,” someone alert and attentive to the

complexities of a text, both moral and aesthetic.²² As a term indicating the cognitive effects of the sentimental, “sensibility” was seen as a discriminating capacity governing critical judgment.²³

Sterne’s cultivation of the “sensible” proclivity takes several forms. The prominence of sensing bodies driving narrative action and moral deliberation is perhaps the most tangible manifestation of sentiment as an ethic and an aesthetic. For both Tristram and Yorick, bodily movement is the means by which sympathetic energies are refined and distributed. To be sure, travel is the organizing principle of *A Sentimental Journey*, but what Yorick refers to as “sentimental commerce” extends beyond the peripatetic motions across national boundaries and varied social contexts.²⁴ Indeed, such travels are notable primarily for the occasions they provide to confront—imaginatively or literally—other bodies and minds. Commerce here describes a continuous interchange of glances and touches that bring Tristram and Yorick into sustained contact with other people, opportunities that facilitate intersubjective intimacy. Yorick’s heartfelt exchange with a monk, his tender encounters with various ladies and impoverished itinerants, and his tearful tête-à-tête with Maria, all serve as instances of what Chandler calls “projective imagination,” a kind of focused regard for another’s interiority.²⁵ Crucially, this attention to interiority is facilitated by sensory engagement: empirical contact with another’s physical being makes imaginative inhabitation possible. For Yorick, touch is the privileged stimulus, evidenced by the repeated references to hands throughout *A Sentimental Journey*; for Tristram, vision is the primary means of access to the other. As Jonathan Lamb has observed, the sentimental scene always begins in a “situation,” a space (such as a garden, bedroom, courtyard, or doorway) that delimits the material and mental exchanges it enables.²⁶ The term indexes the physical circumstances upon which “sentimental commerce” depends, while also echoing the language of Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, wherein a hypothetical “impartial spectator” provides the grounds of moral conduct.²⁷ The ability to place oneself in the situation of another, which then allows one to become the spectator of their *own* situation, constitutes the dual dynamic at the center of Smith’s model of sympathy. It is around such double reflection, dependent on the basic act of inhabiting another’s perspective, that Smith builds his moral philosophy.

The physicality behind Sterne’s sentimental imagination is not lost on Shklovsky, who—for all his emphasis on *Tristram Shandy*’s narrative mechanics—proclaims that “description[s] of bodily posture[s]” are characteristic of Sterne, and moreover that such poses are themselves estranging (*ostranenno*) (*TP* 152). In repeatedly performing characters’ imaginative occupations of others’ thoughts and feelings, Sterne’s novels

enact perspectival shifts as a routine matter of course. And if sensory feeling enables one to figuratively occupy the “situation” of another, it follows that the estrangement resulting from bodily poses (a hand over the forehead, an arm hanging over the bed) derives from their capacity to precipitate this imagined change in perspective. Such a vicarious inhabitation is, after all, the very stuff of estrangement. As we have seen, Tolstoy’s ability to depict things “out of context” [veshchi vyvedennymi iz ikh kontexta] results from this perspectival transference, even as his approach takes such virtual inhabitation a step further by ventriloquizing an equine point of view.²⁸ Shklovsky indeed makes clear that “point of view” [tochka zreniia] is an essential consideration for assessing literary technique, and in “The Novel as Parody,” he explicitly yokes sentiment to perspective: “The depiction of things from a ‘sentimental point of view’ is a special method of depiction [osobyi metod izobrazheniia], very much, for example, as these things might be from the point of view of a horse (Tolstoi’s ‘Kholstomer’) or of a giant (Swift)” (TP 159). His locution here echoes the references to “special perception” [osoboe vospriiatie] enabled by literary craft in the device essay, an association that marks “sentimental” consciousness as a means of making strange.²⁹ As Eccles points out, the centrality of the language of perspective for both sentiment and estrangement suggests a structurally analogous relation: the formalist technique recapitulates “one of the animating fantasies of sentimental fiction,” the exchange of perspective by means of attentive, even intimate, consideration.³⁰ In this vein, I would argue that the act of “laying bare” is itself also a fundamentally sentimental act, likewise reliant on a suggestive physical intimacy. To “lay bare” is to metaphorically strip away the trappings of artificiality, whether formal conventions, affective postures, or sartorial dressings (TP 147). The phrase mobilizes the language of bodily exhibition (*obnazhenie* in Russian connotes exposure of a naked body) as it presumes to reveal the skeleton of the text no less than the affective heart of the fictional other. What becomes likewise apparent here is a kind of sylleptic slippage: the maneuverings of formalist devices, as they employ the idioms and mechanisms of sentiment, merge the literal, embodied figure of feeling and the figurative, textual body.

This conflation points to a central structural dynamic of the Sternean sentimental text. His experimental techniques in fact also amplify “sensibilities” of a different sort, rebuffing the reader’s full absorption by regularly arousing their awareness of the text as a constructed narrative. Here the “sensible reader” is not only attuned to the feelings being described in a given text, but cognizant of the ways that the text itself is composed, and to the complexities of sympathetic identification with

fictional characters. By “laying bare” his plot organization, Sterne draws attention to the artifice of the text and the deliberate construction of its temporal dislocations. In essence, this very fact of enhanced visibility is what is most important for Shklovsky. At the heart of the novel genre is the drama of unveiling, a perspectival shift of a different order that wrenches us out of passive contemplation by inviting heightened attention to form. In a metaphor appropriate to Shklovsky’s days as a mechanic, Sterne lifts the hood of the novel and shows us exactly how things work.

One of Sterne’s central methods of such novelistic self-awareness is a persistent troubling of the line between imitation and parody. This is a dynamic that in fact lies at the core of the history of the sentimental movement in Russia, where sentimental topoi often emerged contemporaneously with their own, frequently humorous, imitations.³¹ *A Sentimental Journey*, which participates in the popular sentimental travelogue and follows a more linear plot structure than *Tristram Shandy*, is often hailed as the impetus behind the Russian cult of sentimentality during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. But it is the earlier novel to which Shklovsky is drawn in his literary essays, and it is not hard to see why: *Tristram Shandy* is a formalist’s playground, full of self-reflexive asides, extravagant digressions, and bawdy humor. Shklovsky’s fascination with the novel is primarily centered on its digressive plot structure, which transforms from apparently random disarray to reveal a methodical design when more closely scrutinized: “Upon first picking up Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, we are overwhelmed by a sense of chaos.... but when you examine the structure of the book more closely, you perceive first of all that this disorder is intentional.... everything in the novel has been displaced and rearranged” (TP 147–48). The oscillation between displacement and rearrangement is precisely where the artistry is found—in the Russian, he writes that Sterne’s “poetics” lie within the narrative’s intentional disorder (“zdes’ est’ svoia poetika” in *O teorii prozy*, 178).

As is evident from the title of Shklovsky’s “Novel as Parody” essay, a self-ironizing parodic spirit lies at the root of Sterne’s craft. His style relies on extremities of form (blank pages, extraneous matter, and line drawings of plot progression) that warp the sentimental mode from within, even as his aesthetics inaugurate the cult of sentiment that resonates widely throughout Russia. As Shklovsky himself notes, Sterne’s own work is heavily reliant on distorted imitations of certain novelistic tropes, such as the “found manuscript” and the fantasy of “conventional” literary time (TP 155, 156). Owing to these structural dynamics, *Tristram Shandy* stands as the novel *par excellence* for Shklovsky—he famously remarked that “*Tristram Shandy* is the most typical novel in world literature”—as it

typifies a regime of sentiment that foregrounds the reflexive dynamism of encounters with bodies and textual forms (*TP* 170). These self-conscious and reflective structures constitute the grounds of narrative difficulty that, recalling Shklovsky's concern with labor, occasion the necessary exertion for restoring the immediacy of apprehension. Sterne's sentimentalism, with its perspectival projections, sustained regard for the sensations and affects of others, and parodic distortions, achieves the estranged perception that forestalls recognition as it renews attention to the content within.

Such is the logic behind the title of Shklovsky's own "sentimental journey," a phrase which gestures to Sterne's specific text as it also evokes the long tradition of derivatives it inspired.³² Indeed, the lack of definite and indefinite articles in Russian contributes to this ambiguity: though the title is typically translated *A Sentimental Journey*, it could just as well be *The Sentimental Journey*. Admittedly, Shklovsky was invested not only in the theorization of estrangement, but in its actual performance: he is known for quipping that he was "both a fish and an ichthyologist."³³ His revolutionary memoir demonstrates the outer limits of a theory of feeling, when heightened sensibilities confront the sensory turmoil of institutional collapse and widespread immiseration. Sterne's spectral presence as a formal interlocutor allows Shklovsky to exploit the relational reflexivity and empiricist materiality subtending the discourse of sentimentalism, which proves uniquely suitable for narrating the dissociative logic and disconnected impressions of historical crisis. The particular mode of revolutionary sensibility that he cultivates relies on a roving perspective that foregrounds discrete sensory data at the expense of narrative coherence. If, as Anne Dwyer argues, *A Sentimental Journey* is a work on the margins of both empire and genre, its distance from imperial center and generic convention enables the perspectival shift necessary for the dual revelation of textual artifact and relational artifice.³⁴

The Revolutionary Journey

A Sentimental Journey comprises Shklovsky's account of the last years of World War I, the 1917 revolutions, and the ensuing civil war, interpolated with literary musings and theoretical witticisms on the emergent "formal method" [formalniy metod].³⁵ The text is an astonishingly mobile one, tracing not only his movement to and from geographical and metropolitan regions—Persia, Galicia, Ukraine, Moscow, St. Petersburg—but in and out of apartments, houses, military camps, and train stations. His peripatetic tendencies are matched by the frenetic flow of the narration,

which reshuffles events achronologically and bears the overwhelming impression of a vast and arbitrary natural disaster spiraling out of control. As he circulates throughout the lands of the collapsing empire, his aesthetic impulse to narrate collides with the exigencies of revolution: lack of paper, food, heat, and shelter. The memoir's striking formal qualities, including flagrant digressions and repeated lacunae, reveal a deep ambivalence about the position of the writing, revolutionary subject: one who can neither fully locate his position in the shifting landscape of political fervor, nor fully divest himself of its violent consequences. The dissonance between his desire to record and his aversion to explanatory mechanisms results in a tersely dispassionate style that privileges disjointed anecdotes. Ostensibly abandoning the titular claim's affective orientation, Shklovsky eschews ruminative reflections, and attempts instead to provide a matter-of-fact catalog of details.

Indeed, the reader would be forgiven if, upon first picking up the memoir, they were "overwhelmed by a sense of chaos" in the manner Shklovsky describes first experiencing Sterne (*TP* 147). The level and volume of detail is striking: the first half, devoted to the February Revolution and Russia's contentious withdrawal from the First World War, chronicles the continuous movements of troops to and from the capital, the reshuffling of military regiments, and the Russian campaign in northern Iran. It is a narrative that discloses a simultaneous attention to detailed descriptions of actions alongside a notable lack of any expository apparatus—in fact, it would not be much of a stretch to say that a majority of Part One is *only* detail. Certainly this granular emphasis on travel, which privileges attention to the particularities of conveyance alongside accounts of landscapes and villages, accords with the tradition of the sentimental travelogue. Yet though Shklovsky adopts the title of Sterne's final novel, his memoir in fact bears closer formal resemblance to the earlier *Tristram Shandy*, including the extremity of its digressive plotting, interruptions, and temporal displacements. While the travelogue provides a general model upon which to draw—one suited to the forced mobility of wartime and revolution—Shklovsky's version lacks the organizing schema of an intentional journey. His orientation is one of bewilderment, as he is shuffled from one locale to the next. Much in the way that Tristram famously struggles to begin from the beginning (his birth being delayed until Volume IV), leading him down a path of detailed asides and tangential musings, Shklovsky's journey rebuffs linear coherence. One might say, in fact, that his narration is not so much *violated* by interruptions and digressions as *constituted* by them. In its lack of central narrative momentum, the revolutionary journey pushes the Sternean digressive schema to its extreme.

Shklovsky thus adopts the conceit of the sentimental travelogue and combines it with the characteristic interruptions of *Tristram Shandy* with which he remains preoccupied in *Theory of Prose*. The result is a set of reflections joined loosely together under the rubric of revolutionary testimony, offering an accretion of numerous encounters absent a framing narrative. In essence, this is the foundational documentarian motive, aiming to provide a factual and ostensibly impartial record of events. At work here is the empiricist epistemology that underwrites Shklovsky's theoretical ruminations on estrangement. On a fundamental level, both the documentary and estranging impulses derive their force from observations, and both sustain an attention to basic units of detail comprising sensory data. Of course, the two methods differ radically in their intentions: the documentary purportedly aims for objectivity, a chronicle of the state of things independent of belief or perspectival bias. Estrangement harbors no such orientation to ostensible truth or objectivity, and in fact perspective is precisely its preoccupation, insofar as it can be modified. But these differences occlude the critical similarity arising from their shared empirical sensibility. In their elevation of empirical data, both documentation and *ostranenie* eschew the attempt to integrate impressions or observations within a clear connecting framework. They avoid coherent and sustained exposition, which would impose an interpretive context, thus inviting habitual and automatic patterns of thinking: the bane of Shklovskian formalism. Instead, *A Sentimental Journey* foregrounds the primacy of apprehension without the associationism of interpretation. In the paratactical model of the travelogue, singular "things"—events, incidents, encounters, or experiences—do not possess a clear dependency on each other; they are sequential but not necessarily connected. What these bits of data lack, in short, is relationality. Knowledge may be dependent on sensory experience in the empiricist paradigm, but synthesizing isolated sense impressions into coherently associated ideas is a separate matter, and one of central importance to the memoir and its estranging potential. At the crux of the issue lies the problem of relationality, a consideration of which necessitates a return to the Humean model of empiricism at work in Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* essays.

For Hume, impressions are fundamentally atomic: they stand independent of each other, with no immanent or logical connections amongst them. This results in the theory of mind by which humans are "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement."³⁶ Yet though we may all constitute monadic, impressionistic bundles of sensations, we are obviously able to organize our thoughts in

a coherent manner, enabling us to make inferences about temporality and causality and so to function in our environments. This is because the mind naturally becomes accustomed to associating certain impressions based on resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect, with the latter processes playing by far the most significant role. Because the operations of cause and effect are based on our observations of the external world—they are, empirically speaking, wholly experientially derived—the result is that reason has no place in telling us what will result from a particular occurrence. Experience thus provides us with what Hume calls custom or habit—note here the reverberation of these terms in Shklovsky's idea of automatization—which comprise the connecting fabric between cause and effect. So the idea that the sun will continue to rise, one of Hume's famous examples, is wholly a matter of supposition based on past experience. The same is true of, say, the belief that a particular consequence (famine or ethnic violence, for example) will arise from operations such as withdrawing from occupied Persia, reaching an armistice with the Central Powers, or instituting nationalist policies, to take several more evidently apposite examples. In essence, we assume that the future will resemble the past because our minds are simply accustomed to believing in the presence of causal reasoning. In formalist parlance, we become automatized.

This is where things break down for Shklovsky. While his memoir retains an interest in impressions, Humean habit has been disrupted, and this associative component of empiricist understanding collapses. The customary propensity of cause and effect ceases to provide a compelling blueprint: there is simply no guarantee that the future will resemble the past. Without robust associative structures, which offer a sense of the relationships between perceptions, we are left with a chaotic, loose, and unconnected assemblage of impressions. Within such a paradigm, Shklovsky evinces a resolute skepticism about the very possibility of knowledge, reiterating a general sense of bewilderment: "And as for me, I can't make any sense out of all the strange things I've seen in Russia" he notes in the midst of questioning the purpose of his narrative enterprise (*SJ* 184). Several pages later he repeats simply, "I didn't understand Russia" (*SJ* 207). The words he uses in the Russian notably foreground an inability to connect: he cannot "merge [slit'] or tie together [sviazat']" the strange things he has witnessed, a failure that throws him definitively into the realm of dissociation.³⁷ If external impressions fail to connect in any meaningful way, then for matters of truth we are reduced to operations of thought with no experiential necessity. Such is the *a priori* reasoning that empiricists such as Hume relegate to a more modest area of inquiry—namely, the field of mathematics (*E* 25). And it is precisely this category to which Shklovsky turns for the assurance of certainty:

During the evenings, I taught the soldiers fractions.

All over Russia, fronts were being opened. The Poles were advancing and my heart ached as it aches now.

And in the midst of all this misery, which I didn't understand, in the midst of the shells falling from the sky, as they fell one day along the Dnieper into a crowd of swimmers, it's very reassuring to say calmly:

"The larger the numerator, the larger the fraction, because that means there are more parts. The larger the denominator, the smaller the fraction, because that means it's more finely sliced."

That's a sure thing.

It's the only sure thing I know. (*SJ* 211)

In this piecemeal narration of his time in the Red Army fighting the White Guard in Ukraine, the misery and chaos of experience comprise the site of doubt, while the only secure source of knowledge is arithmetic. The idea of "truth" remains entirely divorced from the realm of experience and worldly relations.

As he relates the things he sees, Shklovsky continually interrupts himself with interjections, reminding us of the isolated and subjective nature of sensory data. These asides foreground the self-reflexive act of recollection by insisting that the text is a constructed object. In one instance, after impassively noting his brother's execution, he ends by declaring "May 20, 1922. / I continue writing" (*SJ* 148). There are many such moments throughout the memoir in which Shklovsky marks the process of composition, effectively inserting the writing subject into the unfolding text-being-written: "I'm writing on July 22, 1919"; "and now it's July 30, 1919, and I'm writing while on guard with a rifle between my legs" (*SJ* 74, 80). These gestures evoke the self-conscious production visible in the Sternean regime of sentimentality, in which both the author's and the reader's relationships to the text are foregrounded. By calling attention to the event of writing, such interruptions also generate friction between the act of observing and the act of recording. Shklovsky is ever careful not to smooth over the uneven terrain of his thoughts, nor to provide the kind of expository connective tissue—the cause and effect—that might ease the passage from one "thing" to the next. In fact, a roughly textured jumble of perceptions is precisely what Hume surmises would happen if a fully developed person were to somehow experience the world for the first time. In such a case, the absence of prior experience strips away one's capacity to grasp how things operate:

Suppose a person, though endowed with the strongest faculties of reason and reflection, to be brought on a sudden into this world; he would, indeed, immediately observe a continual succession of objects, and one event following another; but he would not be able to discover anything farther. He would not, at first, by any reasoning, be able to reach the idea of cause and effect. (*E* 42)

Hume's account of relational ignorance outlines the Shklovskian telling of revolution, which dismantles the "habit" that makes cause and effect legible, and so results in a succession of sensorially discrete impressions.

As it maintains an empirical preoccupation with revolutionary feeling, the memoir moves beyond the documentarian to the sentimental via its commitment to ambivalence and self-reflexivity. Shklovsky remains self-conscious and deliberate in his chronicling, often making a performance of eschewing commentary as he describes his own methods of narration. Early on he states, "I don't want to be a critic of events: I only want to leave material for the critics. I'm telling about events and making of myself a case study for posterity" (*SJ* 24). This statement is one of many similar asides throughout the memoir that demonstrate the continual negotiation between his conflicting commitments as participant and observer: he is both telling and being told, writing and being written (in the Russian, literally "making himself ready" [prigotovliaiu iz sebia] for posterity).³⁸ In ostensibly shunning exposition—refusing to be, that is, a "critic" of events—he affirms his commitment to the bare situational details by attempting to grasp these phenomena in the necessary absence of a hermeneutic that explains, judges, or connects. The revolutionary spectator, in the language of Hume, experiences the world for the first time: everything to which they have been "accustomed" has disintegrated (*E* 54). What relation do haphazard national policies, massive population displacements, and repeated governmental coups ("all told, I think the Ukraine saw as many as twenty governments," he states while recounting one of his many trips) bear to the painful actualities of revolutionary feeling: starvation, jaundice, hypothermia, etc.? (*SJ* 223). In Humean terms, how does one determine cause and effect? Shklovsky rebuffs the kind of causal thinking based on past experience that remains, for Hume, logically unsponsored. Syntactically and conceptually, one idea is never connected to the next.

What emerges from the repeated negotiation between the materiality of revolutionary life and the abstractions of revolutionary rhetoric is a glaring absence: an evacuation of mediating details. Fine-grained minutiae regarding armored cars, the movement of troops, and the makeshift heating of frigid apartments contrast with broadly abstract pronouncements that defy integration. There is simply no middle discursive register with which to connect the abstract with the material, nor is there

a clear sense of causal, chronological movement. If we take Shklovsky's empiricist framework seriously, then we must recognize the dissolution into scattered particulars for what it is: a sign that we are missing the forces of habit and custom that allow things to make sense. This loss recapitulates the logic of *ostranenie*, by returning us to an essential moment of sensory contact with an unrecognizable national landscape, made newly available for apprehension. For Tihanov, estrangement functions as the "master technique" of the memoir, as it traces the revolutionary theorist's exile and increasing ideological alienation from the purifying narratives of socialist state-building.³⁹ Yet the text's disorienting structure also demonstrates that, as a simple empirical matter, the force of habit has been withdrawn. This withdrawal, the memoir suggests, is what ultimately constitutes revolution, as notional objects, including the very idea of "Russia," collapse into meaningless names. Continual associative refusal results in the bewildered, digressive array of chaotic and singular impressions, which provide the grounds of dynamic interaction that allow us to see not relations themselves—as exemplified in the device essay—but their contingency and artifice. Relationality is neither necessary nor immanent; it is, in true empirical fashion, merely something in which our minds are accustomed to believing. If *ostranenie*, in the hands of Tolstoy, provides a way of seeing things "out of context," then the memoir's dissociative relationality demonstrates that revolution, and its attendant causal strangeness, possess no context at all.⁴⁰

Shklovsky's leveraging of the sentimental mode—his marking of textual production, his parodic recapitulation of the "sentimental journey," his attentive regard for the sensory detail—enacts a heightened attunement to the potential of form to render relations strange. What these sentimental structures ultimately demonstrate, via their radically denuding power to strip away associations and leave only the bare empirical fact, is the essentially narrative character of any version of coherence ascribed to revolutionary experience. In the course of moving from the initial theory of *ostranenie* to its praxis in revolutionary history, we shift from grasping the pretenses of narrative convention to regarding the shattered causality of the imperial and textual landscape. Here we see not just the sensory power that lends Shklovsky's early formalism—and the defamiliarizing operation at its center—its animating epistemic basis, but the outer limits of a sentimental narrative practice. It is no coincidence that this paradigm of literary form was birthed alongside the new Soviet state: the total social and political collapse that dismantles forces of habitude accords new significance to faculties of perception. Out of such conditions of extremity, Shklovsky inaugurates a regime of modern literary theory that privileges the exacting potential of narrative

form's rough textures. Its digressions, dislocations, repetitions, and self-reflexive gestures produce the disorienting strangeness that exposes the sensory, material potency of lived historical crisis alongside its narrative fictions. In recognizing early Russian formalism's embedded intimacy with forms of sensibility and the empiricism that grounds it, we come to apprehend narrative's strange structures as instruments of feeling, in all the multivalence of the term.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

NOTES

- 1 Viktor Shklovsky, "Iskusstvo kak priem," in *O teorii prozy* (Izdatel'stvo Federatsiia, 1983).
- 2 The translation "defamiliarization" is preferred by Fredric Jameson, Peter Steiner, and Eric Naiman, while Svetlana Boym, Ilya Klinger, and Galin Tihanov favor "estrangement." Alternately, Victor Erlich, in his formative study *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine* (Mouton Publishers, 1955), employs the phrase "making it strange."
- 3 For more on the comparative conceptual origins of "poetic language" in Russian philology, see Jessica Merrill, "Historical Poetics and Poetic Language: Rethinking the Concept of Autonomy for Modern Literary Theory," *Poetics Today* 38, no. 3 (2017): 519–48.
- 4 Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* (Stanford University Press, 2019), 33.
- 5 See Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory*; Marijeta Bozovic, "Whose Forms? Missing Russians in Caroline Levine's *Forms*," *PMLA* 132, no. 5 (2017): 1181–86; and Ilya Klinger and Boris Maslov, eds., *Persistent Forms: Explorations in Historical Poetics* (Fordham University Press, 2016).
- 6 Sandra Macpherson, "A Little Formalism," *ELH* 82, no. 2 (2015): 390.
- 7 See especially Macpherson, "A Little Formalism" and Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015).
- 8 Jonathan Krannick and Anahid Nersessian, "Form and Explanation," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 3 (2017): 650–69.
- 9 See Michael Holquist and Ilya Klinger, "Minding the Gap: Toward a Historical Poetics of Estrangement," *Poetics Today* 26, no. 4 (2005): 613–36; Carlo Ginzburg, "Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device," *Representations* 56 (1996): 8–28; and Alexei Bogdanov, "Ostranenie, Kenosis, and Dialogue: The Metaphysics of Formalism According to Shklovsky," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 49, no. 1 (2005): 48–62.
- 10 Rad Borislavov is one of the few scholars who has taken Shklovsky's interest in the sentimental tradition seriously; he reads Shklovsky's use of sentimental topoi in his memoirs as tools for negotiating post-revolutionary political persecution. See Borislavov, "I Know What Motivation Is: The Politics of Emotion and Viktor Shklovskii's Sentimental Rhetoric," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (2015): 785–807.
- 11 Douglas Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Anastasia Eccles, "Formalism and Sentimentalism: Viktor Shklovsky and Laurence Sterne," *New Literary History* 47, no. 4 (2016): 525–45.
- 12 Eccles, "Formalism and Sentimentalism," 539.
- 13 Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Dalkey Archive Press, 1991), 5 (hereafter cited as *TP*). For the Russian original, I use the 1929 version included in *O teorii prozy* (Izdatel'stvo Federatsiia, 1983).

- 14 German and British Romanticisms are most often identified as literary predecessors, in particular Novalis and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; Shklovsky also cites the Victorian Thomas Carlyle in his early version “The Resurrection of the Word” (“Voskreshenie slova”).
- 15 David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Clarendon Press, 1975), 17–18 (hereafter cited as *E*).
- 16 Following James M. Curtis’s identification of a “Bergsonian paradigm” in early formalism, some scholars have attributed Shklovsky’s critical opposition between seeing and recognition to the work of Henri Bergson, for whom recognition is a temporal phenomenon. However, for Bergson, habit enables recollection, rather than diminishing receptivity to our environment (as Shklovsky posits). See Curtis, “Bergson and Russian Formalism,” *Comparative Literature* 28, no. 2 (1976): 109–21.
- 17 James Chandler, “The Novelty of Laurence Sterne,” in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Volume 2: English and British Fiction 1750-1820*, ed. Peter Garside and Karen O’Brien (Oxford University Press, 2015), 111.
- 18 Shklovsky’s longstanding engagement with Sterne evolved over the course of multiple articles and essays. The main essay I consider here from *Theory of Prose*, “The Novel as Parody: Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*,” is in fact a reprinting of an earlier 1921 essay, which is itself a reworking of a 1919 essay entitled “Plot Shift” (“Siuzhetnyi sdvig”).
- 19 Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 152.
- 20 Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: W. Strahan, 1755), 702.
- 21 John Mullan, “Sensibility and literary criticism,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume IV: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 423.
- 22 Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (Penguin, 1980), 31.
- 23 Mullan, “Sensibility and Literary Criticism,” 426.
- 24 Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.
- 25 Chandler, *An Archeology of Sympathy*, 12.
- 26 Jonathan Lamb, “Sterne’s Sentimental Empiricism,” in *The Sentimental Novel in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Albert J. Rivero (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 108.
- 27 Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, 8; Adam Smith notably characterizes this “supposed impartial and well-informed spectator” as “the man within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of . . . conduct.” Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Liberty Fund, 1982), 130.
- 28 Translation mine. See Shklovsky, “Iskusstvo kak priem,” 17.
- 29 Translation mine. See Shklovsky, “Iskusstvo kak priem,” 18.
- 30 Eccles, “Formalism and Sentimentalism,” 537.
- 31 For a detailed account of the wide variety of innovative and humorous approaches to sentimentalism that emerged in Russian literary prose, see Alessandra Tosi, “Sentimental Irony in Early Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature: The Case of Nikolai Brusilov’s *Bednyi Leandr*,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 44, no. 2 (2000), pp. 266–86.
- 32 See Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy*, 151–52, and Tosi, “Sentimental Irony,” 267.
- 33 Quoted in Alexandra Berlina, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Berlina (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 42. For the original, see Shklovsky, *Tëtiva: O neshkhodstve shkhodnogo* (Sovetskii pisatel’, 1970), 239.
- 34 Anne Dwyer, “Revivifying Russia: Literature, Theory, and Empire in Viktor Shklovskii’s Civil War Writings,” *Slavonica* 15, no. 1 (2009): 11–31.
- 35 Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs 1917-1922*, trans. Richard Sheldon (Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), 226 (hereafter cited as *SJ*). For the Russian original, I use *Sobranie sochinenii, Vols I-II*, ed. Il’ia Kalinin (Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018).

- 36 Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol. I, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Clarendon Press, 1978), 252.
- 37 Translation mine. See Shklovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. II, 179. Sheldon translates this as “can’t make any sense out of,” which does not capture the connectivity problem that I am emphasizing (184).
- 38 Translation mine. See Shklovsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. I, 35.
- 39 Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory*, 177.
- 40 Translation mine. See Shklovsky, “Iskusstvo kak priem,” 17.