

World Literature, War, Revolution: The Significance of Viktor Shklovskii's *A Sentimental Journey*

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Abstract: This article examines Shklovskii's previously overlooked engagement with a discursive domain we currently tend to refer to as "world literature;" as such, it is an original contribution not just to understanding *A Sentimental Journey*, arguably the richest part of Shklovskii's 1920s memoir trilogy, but also to honing a transnational approach to his writing. While Shklovskii's work has already been discussed through the prism of mobility and nomadism, this article emphasises his active involvement in, and reaction to, early Soviet discourses and practices of "world literature." It places Shklovskii's commitment to the idea of world literature in the broader context of our present debates on the subject. To understand "world literature" as a specific construct, we must ask the unavoidable question about the location of "world literature" vis-à-vis language, which has important consequences for how we interpret the dispersed legacy of modern literary theory (founded, undoubtedly, by Shklovskii and the Russian Formalists); this would allow us to recognize the enduring relevance of Shklovskii's understanding of literariness for current debates on world literature.

Key words: world literature; literary theory; literariness; translation; Shklovsky; Gorky

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标题: 世界文学、战争和革命：论维克多·什克洛夫斯基《感伤之旅》的意

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内容摘要：什克洛夫斯基参与了我们现今称为“世界文学”的话题领域，先前学界忽视了这一点。因此，本文不仅对理解什克洛夫斯基在 20 世纪 20 年代发表的回忆录三部曲中最丰富的作品《感伤之旅》具有创新意义，而且能够挖掘其创作中的跨国视角。鉴于学界已经广泛探讨了什克洛夫斯基作品中的流动性和游牧文化，本文强调了他在苏维埃早期的“世界文学”话语建构与实践，将什克洛夫斯基对世界文学的贡献置于我们当今探讨这一概念的更加宽泛的语境中。为了理解“世界文学”的特殊属性，“世界文学”的语言处于何地是我们不可回避的问题，它对我们如何解读（由什克洛夫斯基和俄国形式主义学者创立的）现代文学理论也具有重要影响，使我们认识到什克洛夫斯基对文学性的理解之于当今有关世界文学的争论有着持久相关性。

关键词：世界文学；文学理论；文学性；翻译；什克洛夫斯基；高尔基

作者简介：加林·提哈诺夫是伦敦大学玛丽女王学院比较文学系乔治·斯坦纳教授，俄罗斯联邦 HSE 大学的首席研究员。本文是 HSE 大学基础研究项目阶段性成果，由俄罗斯学术卓越项目“5-100”资助。在 AHRC OWRI 研究项目“跨语言动态：重塑社区”的支持下，进行了进一步的研究并获得了额外资助。感谢 Stephen Hutchings, Catherine Davies 和 Andy Byford 在该项目中富有成效的合作。

Viktor Shklovskii (1893-1984) was one of the foremost exponents of Russian Formalism;¹ at the same time, his work was embedded in the discourses and practices of what was later to emerge as “world literature:” a specific focus in the study of literature that emphasizes the travel and circulation of texts across cultural environments in a multitude of languages. This article seeks to uncover Shklovskii’s previously overlooked engagement with this discursive domain; as such, it is an original contribution not just to understanding his *A Sentimental Journey* [*Sentimental’noe puteshestvie*, 1919-23], arguably the richest part of Shklovskii’s 1920s memoir trilogy, but also to honing a transnational approach to his writing. Shklovskii’s work has already been discussed through the prism of mobility and nomadism (Dwyer 2009; 2016);² the present study shifts the discussion towards Shklovskii’s so far unexplored involvement in, and reaction to, early Soviet discourses and practices of “world literature.”³ I begin by placing

1 For background on Russian Formalism, see Tihanov 2012a.

2 On nomadism in Russian culture, see, most recently, Hansen-Löve 2017.

3 On Shklovskii and world literature, from a very different perspective that does not engage with the historical context or with Shklovskii’s *A Sentimental Journey* and his hands-on involvement in Gor’kii’s “World Literature” project, see Hamilton 2018.

his work in the larger context of Russian literary theory (notably the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin) and its engagement with world literature; I then proceed to take a fresh look at *A Sentimental Journey* as a document of war and revolution, but also as an intervention in debates on literary theory and world literature.

Today the legacy of modern literary theory is not available in a pure and concentrated fashion; instead, it is dispersed, dissipated, often fittingly elusive. The reason for this is that this inheritance is now performing its work in a climate already dominated by a different regime of relevance, which it faces directly and must negotiate. The patrimony of literary theory is currently active within a regime of relevance that evaluates literature based on its market and entertainment value, with only residual recall of its previously highly treasured autonomy. This regime of relevance has engendered a distinctive interpretative framework that has recently grown and gained enormous popularity, not least in the classroom, as “world literature.” I place these words in quotation marks, for, by now, they tend to refer to a particular liberal Anglo-Saxon discourse grounded in assumptions of mobility, transparency, and re-contextualizing (but also de-contextualizing) circulation that supports free consumption and unrestricted comparison of literary artefacts.

A look at Russian literary theory during the interwar decades reveals that some of its major trends are highly relevant, obliquely or more directly, to this new framework of understanding and valorising literature in the regime of its global production and consumption. Mikhail Bakhtin begins his book on Rabelais with a reference precisely to world literature: “Of all great writers of world literature, Rabelais is the least popular, the least understood and appreciated” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 1). Bakhtin, however, pays lip service to the then powerful notion of world literature as a body of canonical writing: he ostensibly compares Rabelais to Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Voltaire. But this understanding of world literature does not really interest him. Instead, he takes a different route, re-conceptualizing the study of world literature as a study of the processes that shape the novel to become a world genre, a global discursive power. Of course, Bakhtin is here indebted to the Russian Formalists: for him, too, the novel is the underdog of world literature, whose discursive energies are at first feeble and scattered, unnamed for a long time, until they begin to coalesce and rise to prominence.¹

Bakhtin’s engagement with world literature holds a distinctly non-Eurocentric and, I would emphasize, non-philological charge. He works with the novels he lists mostly in translation, as does Shklovskii before him. While Bakhtin appears

1 For another inscription of Bakhtin in the context of Russian engagements with world literature during the 1930s, see Clark 2011.

to be relying on a Western canon to validate his theses, his primary interest lies in the literature and culture of pre-modernity, when Europe is not yet a dominant force and does not see itself as the centre of the world. Bakhtin is fascinated by the subterranean cultural deposits of folklore, of minor discourses, of ancient genres, of anonymous verbal masses — all of which long predates European culture of the age of modernity (beginning roughly with the Renaissance, but especially since the eighteenth century when the doctrine of cultural Eurocentrism is worked out by the French philosophes, only to witness its first major crisis in the years immediately after the First World War), which is the only dominant (Eurocentric) European culture we know. Even Rabelais' novel interests Bakhtin above all for its traditional, pre-modern, folklore-based layers. He performs a flight away from Eurocentrism not by writing on non-European cultures, but by writing on pre-European cultures, on cultures that thrive on the shared property of folklore, rites, rituals, and epic narratives, centuries before Europe even began to emerge as an entity on the cultural and political map of the world; his is an anti-Eurocentric journey not in space, but in time.¹ Bakhtin's contemporaries, the semantic palaeontologists Nikolai Marr and Ol'ga Freidenberg, whose writings he knew, achieved something similar in their work on myth and pre-literary discourses (Tihanov, "Framing Semantic Paleontology: The 1930s and Beyond"). Seeing Bakhtin in this new light allows us to enlist him as an early predecessor of the non-Eurocentric and translation-friendly thrust of today's Anglo-Saxon academic programmes in world literature. One can thus appreciate that Shklovskii was far from alone in his engagement with the agenda of world literature; but he embraced this agenda earlier, and — as we shall see later on in this article — his work had seminal implications for the future methodology of this particular paradigm.

War, Revolution, World Literature

The publication history of Viktor Shklovskii's *A Sentimental Journey* in Russia is indicative of the turmoil Shklovskii captures in his memoir. Written and published in parts between June 1919 and January 1923, it is a book begun in Russia and completed in emigration. It is a book about war, revolution, literary theory, yet it also deals with world literature in ways that have not previously been appreciated

1 Which is not to say that Bakhtin did not appreciate the need to undertake serious research on literatures beyond Europe and the West; cf. his praise for Nikolai Konrad's important book *West and East* (Bakhtin 1986: 2). Konrad was the foremost Soviet Japanologist and Sinologist during the 1950s-1960s; he was the engine behind the multivolume Soviet *History of World Literature* at the early stages of working out its methodology.

and discussed. The memoir first appeared in its entirety January 1923 in Berlin; the many Russian editions since 1923 would omit various portions of the book (deemed to be incompatible with official dogma), all through to 2002 when the Berlin edition was eventually republished in Moscow.¹ Thus *A Sentimental Journey* is also about exile and the long journey home, which sometimes comes to an end only posthumously (Shklovskii had passed away in Moscow in December 1984).

On first reading, *A Sentimental Journey* is a book about two revolutions (the February and October revolutions of 1917) and the ensuing civil war that engulfed Russia and its empire. It starts with memorable passages about Shklovskii's life before the revolutions: dullness, dreariness, and constant oppression through the tedious passage of time make up the dominant mood in the opening paragraphs. The beginning is thus mutely suggestive of cataclysm and estrangement waiting to happen, mitigating this unbearable sense of flatness. Estrangement is very much Shklovskii's master technique in *A Sentimental Journey*: he often chronologically reshuffles the episodes he narrates, leaves entire semantic entities dangling without resolution, and resurrects the tradition of wit and paradox in order to present the reader with a non-linear exposition of the war and the two revolutions. Ultimately, he eschews taking sides, working instead across political dividing lines. (In an extraordinary passage on the death of his brother, Evgenii, Shklovskii states: "He was killed by the Reds or the Whites. I don't remember which — I really don't remember. But his death was unjust" (156). (Rarely can one find a better example of political withdrawal in favour of a strong ethical judgment; only Kolia, Gaito Gazdanov's protagonist from his émigré novel *An Evening with Claire* [Večer u Kler, completed in 1929 and published as a book the following year], rivals this reluctance to commit politically when he says that joining the Whites was mere accident — he might just as easily have joined the Reds.)

While the concept of estrangement in Shklovskii may have had a number of sources in various scholarly and philosophical traditions, with which he may have been (often indirectly) familiar, the crucial formative factor that contributed to the rise of this concept was undoubtedly the First World War (Tihanov, "The Politics of Estrangement: The Case of the Early Shklovsky"). The war was the propitious ground on which a materialist, substance-orientated view of the world grew strong and flourished amidst and out of — ultimately as a protest against — the cacophony and chaos of annihilation. Facilitating a return to the pristine nature of things

1 All quotations are to the English translation (Shklovsky 1970), occasionally modified by me for the sake of accuracy. For the first full republication of the 1923 Berlin edition in Russia, see Shklovskii 2002.

seemed to be for so many other writers of the war generation the greatest gift that the progress of technology, industry, and warfare, so evident on the eve of the war and during it, could give back to a frustrated Europe. Estrangement was a technique designed to assist this process by equipping the reading public with the required acuteness of perception. The time is ripe to place the early Shklovskii — even more forcefully than this has been done on occasion in the past — in his proper context, that of the First World War, and to see him as an author participating in the larger constellation of brilliant European essayists, whose work and ideas were rooted in their war experience. At the same time, we need to be aware of the role the October Revolution played in Shklovskii's evolution after 1917. The revolution no doubt added to his war experience, amplifying and throwing into relief his main dilemma, that of aesthetic innovation (ambiguous and at times shaky) vis-à-vis social and political conservatism. It was this dilemma that led him to reject the October Revolution as a member of the Socialist Revolutionary party — but also to highlight its attractiveness, its sheer incommensurability, scale, and purifying force. The revolution superimposed a new political dynamic which, while not cancelling the dispositions of the war experience, demanded different responses; in other words, in Shklovskii's memoir the War and the Revolution are to be thought together without being conflated. Remarkably, Shklovskii's memoir weaves into these powerful narratives a third one: an examination of Jewish identity and anti-Semitism during the war (in the East, in Persia, Shklovskii notes the absence of anti-Semitism as a factor that helps his reconciliation with, and acceptance of, the locals). *A Sentimental Journey* is thus a book that straddles intense self-reflection and unmitigated self-abandonment to fate: Shklovskii refers to Spinoza's famous example of the "falling stone" (*A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922* 133) in order to quip, self-ironically, that "a falling stone does not need to think."¹

Shklovskii's memoir, however, is not just about war and revolution, but also about world literature. Shklovskii's involvement in the emergent Russian debate on world literature was direct and, as often with Shklovskii, marked by commitment and distance in the same breath. He joined Gor'kii's "World Literature" project in 1919.² This was a large-scale publishing project, educational and socially ameliorative at its core. The idea was for a new, expanded canon of world literature to be established in post-revolutionary Russia, including — for the first time —

1 Spinoza used the example of the falling stone to suggest that free will was an illusion: if the stone were endowed with self-consciousness, it would still be convinced that it was moving of its own accord, even if it had been thrown by someone or otherwise obeying the force of gravity.

2 Gor'kii's project was called "Vsemirnaia literature" in Russian, a term that can be translated as both *world literature* and *universal literature*.

not just works from Western literatures, but also from the literatures of Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. These works had to be translated (in some cases retranslated to replace poor existing translations), equipped with proper introductions and apparatus, and made available in reliable but cheap scholarly editions to those previously disenfranchised: the workers, peasants, and soldiers, in short, the classes of the oppressed. The project was centred in Petrograd, and its infrastructure included a publishing house which, at its zenith, would employ around 350 editors and translators, as well as a translators' studio which was meant to familiarize younger translators with translation theory, literary theory, and other cognate fields.¹

It is to this studio that Shklovskii was recruited by Gor'kii in 1919 to give lectures in literary theory. One has to recall that at that time Petrograd was a city ravished by famine and civil war, in the grip of dire poverty and utter insecurity. In *A Sentimental Journey*, Shklovskii laconically notes his aunt's death from starvation; it is in this atmosphere that he threw himself into Gor'kii's project. The ambition to promote a non-Eurocentric approach to world literature was particularly important: early on, Gor'kii established an editorial committee on oriental literatures chaired by his friend of long standing and dean of Russian Indology, academician Sergei Ol'denburg; the committee also included the brilliant sinologist Vasilii Alekseev, the renowned Arabist Ignatii Krachkovskii, the already famous archaeologist and linguist Nikolai Marr, journalist and writer Aleksandr Tikhonov, and Gor'kii himself.² The paradox at the heart of this project was not, of course, the fact that Gor'kii set out to redress decades of social injustice; he regarded his project precisely as an instrument of radical social transformation, in which previously disadvantaged layers of society would be offered access to the greatest works of literature. But this radical social transformation, meant to facilitate upward mobility for millions of people, was to be achieved through the most conservative of methods: by invoking a secure (if augmented) canon of, to recall Matthew Arnold's definition of culture from *Culture and Anarchy*, "the best that has been thought and said." Gor'kii's radical project was thus tempered by his humanist notion of world literature as a canon of texts and a tool of inculcating the

1 On Gor'kii's project, see, most recently, Khotimsky 2013 and Tyulenev 2016; for a more essayistic account, see the chapter 'Petrograd, 1918' in David 2011. On Soviet engagements with world literature between the World Wars, see, more generally, Epelboin 2005.

2 When later Gor'kii published his journal *Beseda* (1923-1925) in Berlin, he once again sought to recruit Ol'denburg and Alekseev as contributors (Yedlin 1999: 158); according to Khodasevich, the idea of establishing *Beseda* (initially under the title *Putnik*) was actually Shklovskii's (Yedlin 1999: 157-158).

virtues of civility and erudition (or “learnedness,” in the language of that epoch). This understanding of “world literature” goes back to the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century when Wieland (not by accident the author of the first important German novel of education), some 25 years before Goethe, in a somewhat elliptical manner talked about world literature as an instrument of self-improvement that teaches us to better communicate with others and supplies knowledge of the world we would otherwise not have access to.¹

The translators’ studio established in 1919 had some of the best contemporary Russian writers and translators contributing to its work: Evgenii Zamiatin, Nikolai Gumilev, Kornei Chukovskii (one of the best translators of literature from the English language who had already produced translations of Walt Whitman’s poetry); of the Russian Formalists, Boris Eikhenbaum was also invited to contribute. Shklovskii notes in his memoir that the translators’ studio quickly evolved into a “literary studio,” where drafts of literary works were discussed and literary theory and criticism were on the agenda. “I never in my life worked the way I did that year” (Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922* 186), he writes. Before a young audience, Shklovskii was teaching Don Quixote and Sterne, writing, in conversation with his students, the chapters on Cervantes and Sterne that were to be included in his book *O teorii prozy* (1925; second, expanded edition, 1929; English translation, *Theory of Prose*).

The Portability of Literariness: Shklovskii’s Enduring Relevance

At this juncture, it is important to place Shklovskii’s commitment to the idea of world literature in the broader context of our present debates on the subject. To understand “world literature” as a specific construct, we must ask the unavoidable question about the location of “world literature” vis-à-vis language, which has important consequences for how we interpret the dispersed legacy of modern literary theory (founded, undoubtedly, by Shklovskii and the Russian Formalists). This question appears to be banal at first sight; yet, there could not be a more fundamental question when it comes to how we think about literature than the question of language. Here we need to confront the issue of translation and recognize its legitimacy, not just with reference to current debates (between those who champion the beneficial role of translation and those who treasure the idea of untranslatability as a way of opposing politically dubious equivalences),² but by going to the very origins of modern literary theory and the work that Shklovskii

1 See Tihanov 2011, esp. 143.

2 For these two positions, see, respectively, Damrosch 2003 and Apter 2013.

himself was doing in 1919/1920, some of which he succinctly captures in *A Sentimental Journey*.

My contention here is that we need to begin to understand the current Anglo-Saxon discourse of world literature, in which the legitimization of reading and analysing literature in and through translation plays a pivotal role, as an echo of, and a late intervention in, a debate that begins in the early days of classic literary theory.¹ By “classic literary theory” I mean here the paradigm of thinking about literature that rests on the assumption that literature is a specific and unique discourse, whose distinctiveness crystalizes around the abstract quality of “literariness.” This way of thinking about literature begins around the First World War — with Shklovskii and his fellow Formalists — and is largely dead by the late 1980s. In *A Sentimental Journey* (192), Shklovskii rages against those who think of literature primarily as a conveyor of political ideas and civic values rather than as a specific, self-sufficient use of language: “How strange to substitute the history of Russian liberalism for the history of Russian literature.” But classic literary theory does not disappear without leaving behind a dissipated legacy consisting in rehearsing, in various ways, the question of the centrality — or otherwise — of language in how we understand literature. The current debate on “world literature” is part and parcel of this dissipated legacy of classic literary theory, re-enacting the cardinal debate on whether one should think literature within the horizon of language or beyond that horizon. It is incumbent upon us to recognize that the current polemics on “world literature” in the Anglo-American academy are an extension of these earlier debates on language and literariness originating in classic literary theory, not least because, like so many other discourses of liberal persuasion, the Anglo-Saxon discourse of world literature, too, often passes over in silence its own premises, leaving them insufficiently reflected upon, at times even naturalizing them.

As is well-known, the Russian Formalists agreed that what lends literature its specificity is literariness. But we tend to forget that they disagreed on what constitutes literariness.² Roman Jakobson (mentioned once in *A Sentimental Journey*, but more frequently in Shklovskii’s only slightly later memoirs *Zoo*, or *Letters not about Love and Third Factory*) believed that literariness is lodged in the intricate, fine-grained workings of language. To him, only the language of the original matters, as this intricacy cannot be captured in translation. Not by chance

1 This argument is more fully developed in Tihanov 2017b.

2 For an early and insightful interpretation, from a different perspective, of the split within Russian Formalism over how literariness should be understood and captured, see Hopensztand 1938 (of which there is a passable English translation: see Hopensztand 1989).

does Jakobson spend his entire career (when it comes to his work as a literary scholar) analysing texts written in verse, basing these analyses on the language of the original. Shklovskii, Eikhenbaum, and, to some extent, Tynianov, on the other hand, believed that the effects of literariness are also (and, in a sense, primarily) produced on levels above and beyond language. In a striking difference to Jakobson, Shklovskii, in particular, chose to analyse prose rather than poetry, and to do this in translation. This is precisely the work he was doing in the translators' studio in Petrograd, of which he reminisces in *A Sentimental Journey*. It is the level of composition, rather than the micro-level of language, that claimed Shklovskii's attention when trying to explain the effects of literariness. His famous distinction between *fabula* and *siuzhet*, for example, works with undiminished validity also when we read in translation.¹ We do not need the language of the original to appreciate the transposition of the material and its reorganization through retrospection, retardation, etc. (techniques which Shklovskii, sometimes following Sterne, himself abundantly employs in *A Sentimental Journey*).² Moreover, Shklovskii and Tynianov proved that even on the level of style the language of the original is not the only vehicle of literariness. The parodic aspects of Don Quixote, for instance, can be gleaned and grasped also in translation, provided we have some background knowledge of chivalric culture and its conventions. Thus, the Russian Formalists' internal debate on what constitutes literariness — and Shklovskii's belief in its portability beyond the language of the original — had the unintended consequence of lending today ammunition and justification to those who believe in the legitimacy of reading and analysing literature in translation.

Let me repeat: the current discourse of “world literature” is an iteration of this principal question of classic literary theory: should one think literature within or beyond the horizon of language? This specific iteration recasts the question, while retaining its theoretical momentum. Shklovskii (who was blissfully monolingual and taught in the translators' studio Cervantes and Sterne in translation), together with Eikhenbaum (who, despite being a reader of English who could — and did — work with texts of fiction in the original, would also often highlight the fact that literariness materializes on the level of composition rather than solely on the micro-level of language), was facing the foundational conundrum of literary theory: how to account for literariness with reference to both individual languages and language

1 For the Russian Formalists, *fabula* was the chronological sequence of events as they progress from the start to the end of a narrative text, whereas *siuzhet* was the way in which these events are reorganized to appear (through devices such as retrospection, prolepsis, retardation, and so on) in the literary work of art (a novel, a story, etc.).

2 On Shklovskii's uses of, and debt to, Sterne's prose, see Finer 2010.

per se. If Shklovskii's response was to be seminal in terms of theory, it had to be a response that addressed both the singularity of language (the language of the original) and its multiplicity (the multiple languages in which a literary text reaches its potential audiences in translation). No claim to theory would lawfully exist unless literariness could be demonstrated to operate across languages, in an act of continuous estrangement from the language of the original.

The Anglo-Saxon discourse on world literature, foremost in the work of David Damrosch, has proceeded — so it seems to me — in the steps of Shklovskii by foregrounding the legitimacy of working in translation. Damrosch has implicitly confronted the tension between the singularity and multiplicity of language by concluding that studying a work of literature in the languages of its socialization is more important than studying it in the language of its production, not least because this new priority restricts and undermines the monopoly of methodological nationalism in literary studies. (The languages of creation and socialization can, of course, coincide, and the implications flowing from this, especially where this coincidence involves a global language such as English, are something worth thinking about; equally, there are cases in which more than one language can be deployed in producing a work of literature — but never as many as the plethora of languages that provide the infrastructure for its circulation.)¹

Shklovskii's *A Sentimental Journey* is thus not just a monument to the February and October revolutions and the ensuing civil war; it is also a monument to one of the most seminal moments in classic literary theory which still reverberates in our current debates on world literature. The wide-ranging implications of Shklovskii's highlighting the legitimacy of reading and analysing literature in translation mitigates, at least to some extent, concerns by some of his contemporaries that the Formalists' concept of literariness was based on the discussion of an overwhelmingly Eurocentric (and thus relatively narrow and insufficiently representative) corpus of texts.²

Yet one should not assume that Shklovskii embraced Gor'kii's project unreservedly. In a splendid passage from *A Sentimental Journey*, Shklovskii ironically distances himself from what he clearly perceived as a project on too grand a scale, and one that sought to revolutionize culture through the conservative educational tools of the canon. In the passage in question Shklovskii refers to both Gor'kii's world literature project and the eponymous publishing house:

1 On the political and cultural baggage of English (and hence the dangers of asserting it as a seemingly transparent medium of translation), see, e.g. Mufti 2016.

2 For a more detailed discussion of these concerns, see Tihanov 2017a, esp. 426-427.

“World Literature.” A Russian writer mustn’t write what he wants to: he must translate the classics, all the classics; everyone must translate and everyone must read. Everyone will read everything and will know everything, absolutely everything. No need for hundreds of publishing houses; one will do — Grzhebin’s. And a catalogue projected to one hundred years, a catalogue one hundred printer’s signatures long; in English, French, Indo-Chinese and Sanskrit. And all the literati and all the writers will fill in the schemes according to rubrics, supervised by none other than S. Ol’denburg and Alexandre Benois, and then shelves of books will be born, and everyone will read all the shelves and know everything. No heroism or faith in people is needed here. [...] (Shklovskii, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922* 189; translation modified)

This is Shklovskii at his best: both passionate and restrained, ironically distanced yet committed. He clearly objects to Gor’kii’s project of world literature, as he sees in it a coercive instrument with which to impose a non-negotiable canon (“the classics”); he even seems to suggest that Gor’kii’s project is a form of censorship, and of contempt for the freedom of expression. There is also a dormant nationalism in Shklovskii’s indictment of Gor’kii’s implied criticism of Russian literature as provincial compared to the canon of world literature. The enumeration of languages into which the overambitious catalogue of the “World Literature” publishing house was to be printed is — without a shadow of a doubt — only half-serious in tone (“Indo-Chinese” is Shklovskii’s way of mockingly referring to a non-extant (single) language of the East; ‘Sanskrit’ is by that time a language endowed with huge cultural capital accumulated over centuries, but nonetheless strongly reduced in its vernacular use). As a matter of fact, Gor’kii’s World Literature publishing house published two separate catalogues (both in 1919): one containing a list (marked as “provisional”, as the catalogue put it) of translations of literary works from Europe and North America, and one of (intended) translations from non-Western literatures (titled “The Literature of the Orient”); the first catalogue featured an essay by Gor’kii and editorial apparatus, both also translated into French, English, and German, whereas the second catalogue had an unsigned brief introduction and editorial apparatus, both available in the catalogue solely in Russian and French (cf. Katalog 1919a and Katalog 1919b). Even before the criticism voiced in his memoir, Shklovskii had openly written to Gor’kii about his discontent with the project’s extensive understanding of world literature that was in danger of

reproducing a mechanical view of it as the sum total of its parts, and accounting for its variety in merely spatial terms: “Grzhebin’s publishing house, and the House of Scholars, and ‘World Literature’ (real name: ‘the whole of the world’ [literature]) — this is also a [case of] spatial perception.”¹ Shklovskii’s irony was shared by Eikhenbaum who in his 1925 article ‘O. Henry and the Theory of the Novella’ referred to 1919-1924 as the time when, in Russia, Russian literature “lost its seat to ‘world literature’” under the pressure of a flourishing translation industry; Eikhenbaum deliberately put the words ‘world literature’ in quotation marks to signal his sarcasm (Eikhenbaum, *Literatura: Teoriia. Kritika. Polemika* 166).

The fascination of *A Sentimental Journey* for today’s reader lies in its idiosyncratic, sometimes even whimsical, portrayal of war and revolution — a memoir which zig-zags through five years of history, from Russia to Galicia to northern Iran to Russia, then to Ukraine, back to Russia, back to Ukraine, and then on again to Russia, to Finland and Germany, capturing acts of profound historical transformation through the ephemera of daily life; a memoir displaying Shklovskii’s blissful disregard for dates — he cannot recall whether he married in 1919 or 1920 (Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922* 177) — and his playful employment of compositional techniques of estrangement à la Sterne. But Shklovskii’s *A Sentimental Journey* is also a valuable piece of engagement with literary theory through fiction: an early — and at the time pioneering — attempt to practice theory without a theoretical meta-language. This daring attempt, which begins with *A Sentimental Journey*, intensifies in the next two memoirs written by Shklovskii (*Zoo, or Letters not about Love and Third Factory*); it foreshadows post-structuralism’s own endeavour (especially visible in Roland Barthes’s later work) to amalgamate productively fiction and theory in an uncharted journey through the text. Paradoxical, ironic, difficult, at times soberly pessimistic, Shklovskii’s greatest achievement in his *Sentimental Journey* is the realization that one has to confront and test the language of (Formalist) literary theory against the language of fiction by staging their symbiotic existence within a single work. Through Shklovskii’s early memoirs — including his *Sentimental Journey* — Russian Formalism comes into its own, realizing that the most significant Other of literary theory is literature itself.²

It is this twofold relevance of Shklovskii’s text — as a quirky document of its time and as an intervention in consequential debates on literary theory and on world

1 Shklovskii’s letter to Gor’kii (April 1922), quoted in Shklovskii 2018 (191). (“Grzhebinskoe izdatel’stvo, i Dom uchenykh, i ‘Vsemirnaia literatura’ (nastoiashchee nazvanie: vsia vsemirnaia) — tozhe prostranstvennoe vospriatie;” my translation - GT).

2 For more on this, see Tihanov 2016.

literature — that extends its life across time and space. Shklovskii was to continue his engagement with the Soviet discourse of world literature during the 1930s, especially in the several different versions of his *Marco Polo*,¹ a narrative about travel to and from East Asia that, in fact, staged a journey across land masses which were to become a part of the Asian territories of the Soviet Union. Orientalism, empire, and world literature² were to meet in this deceptively modest book in a way that was both fascinating and ideologically profoundly ambivalent.

Shklovskii was thus directly engaged with the Soviet discourse and practices of world literature; but his single most important contribution, in my view, was to have posed the question about what constitutes literariness — and to have answered it in a way that continues to impact our current polemics around world literature. His insistence that the literary core of literature travels well, his belief, in other words, that literariness is in the end portable, remains an unavoidable argument in these disputes, even when the academic practitioners of ‘world literature’ are not always prepared to acknowledge this. Shklovskii, then, furnishes an ideal example of the diffuse, subterranean afterlife of Russian literary theory in our own century.

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1 Different incarnations of this text were published over more than 35 years, since 1931 into the late 1960s; particularly influential was the 1936 version in the book series “The Life of Remarkable People” [Zhizn’ zamechatel’nykh liudei] founded by Gor’kii (Shklovskii 1936).

2 Suffice it to mention the importance of *Marco Polo*’s travelogue for Coleridge, Kafka, Borges, and Calvino, amongst others.

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