

The Poetics of Irony

Viktor Shklovskij's *Irony*

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but much can be hinted at.

Marin Prelog

In his *Artistic Journey*, Viktor Shklovskij characterized Alex's famous poem "The Twelve" as an "ironic piece." He went on to add, "by 'irony' I mean not 'satire' but a special device—either the simultaneous perception of two heterogeneous *transparencies* or the simultaneous relating of a single phenomenon to two essential series" (239; 337).¹ As this definition suggests, the aesthetic mechanism underlying the trope of irony is in fact the hetero- or asynchronic slippage of the linguistic sign. Yet, as such, irony would not be distinct from any other language trope, in that the same mechanism operates in every figurative and some would claim, even nonfigurative usage.

Irony, in contrast to other tropes, cannot be reduced to the simple displacement of the linguistic sign in the act of designation. Quite the contrary: it necessarily involves a communicational situation in which two parties perceive the displaced sign in two very different ways. Shklovskij's version of the story of Peter in *Irony* is a case in point. "The Apostle Peter denied Christ because of the cold. The night was cool and he looked up to the fire, but at the first act of public opinion, the servants kept questioning Peter about Christ and Peter kept denying him." Shklovskij concluded: "If the weather had been warm, Peter would have remained in the darkness and the cock would have crowed for nothing like all cocks, and in the Gospel there would be no irony" (17; 23).²

Petr Steiner

¹This paper was delivered at the annual convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in Washington, D.C. on October 15, 1962.

The Praxis of Irony

Viktor Šklovskij's Zoo*

Nothing in this sphere can be proven,
but much can be hinted at.

Martin Heidegger

In his Sentimental Journey, Viktor Šklovskij characterized Blok's famous poem "The Twelve" as an "ironic piece." He hastened to add, "by 'irony' I mean not 'mockery' but a special device--either the simultaneous perception of two heteronymous [raznorečivij] phenomena or the simultaneous relating of a single phenomenon to two semantic series" (239; 337).¹ As this definition suggests, the semiotic mechanism underlying the trope of irony is in fact the homonymic-synonymic slippage of the linguistic sign. Yet, as such, irony would not be distinct from any other language trope, in that the same mechanism operates in every figurative, and some would claim, every nonfigurative usage.

Irony, in contrast to other tropes, cannot be reduced to the simple displacement of the linguistic sign in the act of designation. Quite the contrary: it necessarily involves a communicational situation in which two parties perceive the displaced sign in two very different ways. Šklovskij's version of the story of Peter in Zoo is a case in point. "The Apostle Peter denied Christ because of the cold. The night was cool and he walked up to the fire, but at the fire sat public opinion: the servants kept questioning Peter about Christ and Peter kept denying him." Šklovskij concludes: "If the weather that night had been warm, Peter would have remained in the darkness and the cock would have crowed for nothing, like all cocks, and in the Gospel there would be no irony" (17;22).²

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The irony of Peter's utterance rests in its strategic use of language.

Peter lied about his real association with the Saviour and thus acquired his place by the fire. According to Laurence Sterne, a writer whose work Šklovskij not only analyzed but consciously emulated, "men have but two ends in view in speaking or writing, viz. to make others understand their meaning, or else to keep their meaning concealed."³ It is the latter type of discourse, that which conceals rather than reveals, that for the time being I shall call ironic.

Šklovskij's Zoo works on three distinct levels: 1) as love letters from Šklovskij to Elsa Triolet; 2) as a novel; and 3) as the statement of a man who has lost a political struggle. As we shall see, the ironic quality of this text--its intricate pattern of dissimulation and concealment--unfolds as well on the erotic, esthetic, and political levels.

Let me begin with the erotic level. In the crass language of modern sexology, Šklovskij's love for Elsa Triolet can be described as the libidinal desire of a heterosexual male. The whole point of this level of Zoo, however, is that Šklovskij's sexual drive remains frustrated. Elsa is indifferent to him. Here the first irony enters the scene: his unsatisfied sexual desire is repressed, only to surface in other forms. For example, in describing his lonely visits to the Berlin Zoo, Šklovskij contrasts the "reasonably happy animals" who sometimes produce young with those locked up alone. One ape in particular reminds him of his own fate. The animal is about his height, and also a foreigner in Germany. Yet similar as they seem, Šklovskij disapproves of "our forefather," as he terms him. "The ape languishes--it is a male--all day long. At three, he gets up to eat. He eats from a plate. Afterward, he sometimes indulges in his miserable monkey business. That's offensive and shameful. You tend to think of him as a man, yet he is utterly without shame" (26; 32).

Šklovskij never mentions whether he himself might be indulging in any "miserable monkey business." He does not even refer to this activity by its proper name; the masturbation is merely alluded to through a euphemism. But it is precisely through such repression and dissimulation, according to Šklovskij's theory of art, that the sexual becomes sublimated into the esthetic. As he argues in an early essay, "Art as Device," erotic allusions are nothing but implimentations of the principle of defamiliarization that underlies every artistic phenomenon.⁴ Before we turn to the esthetic irony of Zoo, however, there are other erotic ironies to be observed.

Besides auto-eroticism, Zoo frustrates two other avenues for direct sexual gratification. The first is rape. Šklovskij refers to this non-ironic mode of sexual intercourse in an introductory letter to the second edition of Zoo published in the Soviet Union after his return from Berlin. This letter contains a story about a gang of Moscow car mechanics who were forcing women into their cars in order to rape them outside the city. "These men," Šklovskij writes, "were no worse than any others. They were just ordinary mechanics; they knew how to fix a car and they knew how cold iron can be when the temperature falls below freezing. The speed of the engine and the blare of the horn knocked them off the track" (119).⁵ This comment establishes an obvious parallel between the rapists and Šklovskij, whose obsession with fast cars and mechanics is the topic of letter twenty-six. But once again, this path toward straightforward sexual gratification is merely mentioned and the underlying drive repressed, obviously because society's disapproval of rape is extreme. If in the case of masturbation one risks social disapproval, rape involves criminal prosecution. Šklovskij is careful to inform us that the apprehended car mechanics were executed.

The last means of quick erotic satisfaction mentioned in Zoo is sex-for-hire. However, all three of Šklovskij's encounters with prostitutes in the book are ironically subverted, and any attempt at sexual intercourse is frustrated. In letter thirteen, he juxtaposes a striptease observed in a Berlin Nachtslokal with his memory of a highschool party in which the back of a naked prostitute served the boys as a card table. In the first case, female nudity is presented as something pre-sexual--the natural nakedness of a human body such as that of a mother or sister. "Everything [in this Nachtslokal] was arranged very neatly and probably kept in the family. As for debauchery, there was, in all likelihood, none" (51; 56).

In the second case female nudity might be termed post-sexual; it is nudity laid bare for its own sake. The usual expectations connected with a naked prostitute are frustrated and the woman's body is diverted to a different semantic series, that of card tables. There is a third prostitute in a red hat that Šklovskij keeps meeting at the corner of Potsdamerstrasse during his night walks. But here the obstacle to satisfaction is linguistic: the prostitute keeps making Šklovskij an offer that he cannot understand, because it is framed in German.

Šklovskij describes this last situation as the inverse of his relationship with Elsa Triolet: there it is Šklovskij who makes propositions to which Elsa turns a deaf ear. This negative parallelism is, of course, ironic in itself. But the barrier between Šklovskij and Triolet is not so much linguistic as rhetorical. Here we need a short excursus on the game of seduction. Its structure resembles what one German philosopher (I cannot pronounce his name) described as the establishing of truth: the double play of clearing and concealing. The seducer is supposed to bring to the surface in his partner a hidden sexual desire, while at the same time hiding his own motives for speaking. Šklovskij,

it seems, succeeded in the latter--hence the subtitle of his book, Letters not about Love--but he failed in the former--Elsa did not fall in love with him.

There are, however, no second prizes in the game of seduction. He who fails to get his girl is merely the butt of jokes. His failure can be mitigated only through irony, in other words, only through dissimulating discourse. And here the esthetic level of Zoo becomes relevant. As the slighted Šklovskij exclaims: "Give everything a cosmic dimension, take your heart in your teeth, write a book" (20; 26). With these words, the unsuccessful love affair is transformed into the motivation for a novel. The "Author's Preface" describes the genesis of Zoo precisely in these terms:

This book was written in the following way. Originally, I planned to do a series of essays on Russian Berlin; then it seemed a good idea to connect these essays with some sort of general theme like "Menagerie" ("Zoo"); thus the title of the book was born, but it failed to connect the pieces. Then came the idea of making some sort of epistolary novel out of them.

In an epistolary novel, the essential thing is motivation--precisely why should these people be writing to each other? The usual motivation is love and partings. I took the following variant of this motivation: the letters are being written by a man in love with a woman who has no time for him. Here I needed a new detail: since the basic material of the book had nothing to do with love, I introduced a prohibition against writing about love. What emerged I expressed in the subtitle, "Letters not about Love." [3; 9]

At first glance this preface might appear to provide an honest account of how Zoo was written. But it soon turns out to be merely a device--the laying

bare of its techniques--which is a product of the ironic theory of literature that Šklovskij espoused. We have already observed the importance of defamiliarization on the erotic level of Zoo. On the esthetic level, it is a key term. The telos of art, according to Sklovskij, is to render the world strange and unusual. Therefore, art is ironic, just like the Apostle Peter, in denying the obvious for the sake of the improbable. But unlike the lie of the apostate Peter, the artistic 'lie' is not evil. It is, in patristic lingo, a pia fraus, for its goal is quite altruistic: not to warm itself up but to warm up the world, to render its cold, petrified forms lively and exciting.

There is still another important difference between apostolic and artistic 'lies.' Peter's statement was a unique act (though repeated thrice), whereas literature is a historical process, a virtually infinite accretion of such acts--lies told upon lies told upon lies. In Zoo, Šklovskij takes up this historical nature of literary production several times, most facetiously in letter twenty-three. "I am sick of wit and irony," he writes. "How I want simply to describe objects as if literature had never existed. It would also be fine to write in long sentences something like: 'Lovely is the Dnieper in quiet weather'" (84; 87). But here the ironist discards irony through a double irony. His innocent, non-literary sentence is actually stolen from Gogol's short story "A Terrible Vengeance." And the denial of its literary status is in fact an echo of a famous statement from Belinskij's "Literary Reveries" written about two years after Gogol's short stories had appeared: "there is no literature in our country." This echo, however, cannot be taken at face value, for Šklovskij's negative attitude toward Belinskij is well known.⁶ Thus, the message of this double irony is clear. A writer cannot step out of literary history. Art never defamiliarizes reality in a simple straightforward manner. The true objects of

its defamiliarization are previous artistic forms, which in the course of time have become automatized.

If every literary work inevitably contains literary history, Šklovskij's Zoo, whose letter twenty-two is a concise history of its own genre, might be called the most typical work of world literature. For according to Šklovskij's theory, artistic works are conglomerates of devices--irreducible monads of artistic form that migrate freely from work to work. These devices change our perception of reality by both isolating material from its usual context and deforming it. Now, the first irony of art for Šklovskij lies in its need to justify its devices. The defamiliarized view of reality is usually not presented on its own merits, but justified through psychopathological, mystical, or fantastic motivations. But since one cannot fool all of the people all of the time, a second-degree irony becomes an artistic imperative. After a while any explanatory motivation becomes boring, and so a new motivation must be introduced--the old devices dressed in new clothes. Thus, "shocked" by centuries of artistic deception and the abuse of the reader's trust, Šklovskij proposes a new code of authorial "honesty." Instead of hiding behind a smokescreen of motivations, the author should declare the emperor naked--lay the devices bare for the reader's direct inspection.

The history of the novel, from this perspective, provides the following picture. Like all narratives, the novel's artfulness lies in the transformation of a lifelike story (fabula) into a literary plot (sjužet). This task is complicated by the composite nature of the novel, by the fact that it is a concatenation of several short stories. The history of the novel is in fact a succession of different motivations for fusing short stories into larger wholes. In the original novel (here Šklovskij refers to Don Quixote), the protagonist's function

was to string the pieces together. After this method became automatized, the psychology of the hero was used as the connecting thread. The works of Stendhal, Tolstoj and Dostoevskij provide ample variations on this psychological motivirovka.

But eventually even this mode of fusion wears out. The audience's interest in connecting the individual pieces wanes and the segments themselves begin to attract attention. At this moment motivation itself may be turned into a device. The individual segments are brought together in a negative way to show the reader that they have nothing in common and their connective tissue is merely a technical device enabling the writer to make them into a novel. Šklovskij's inspiration for this wierd technique, as he tells us in Zoo, was his visit to the variety theatre in Prague. There the individual acts were connected at the end by a clown who repeated them, parodying and exposing them. However, a "more interesting case" of this device, Šklovskij notes at the conclusion of his foray into the history of the novel, "is the book which I am currently writing. It is called Zoo: Letters not about Love, or The Third Héloïse" (82; 85). It is a more interesting case precisely because this device is laid bare at the very beginning of the work, in the "Author's Preface."

However, Šklovskij might have shifted this laying bare to the introduction for an extra-esthetic reason. So far we have seen that his discourse had two addressees: the recipient of his love letters, Elsa Triolet, and the literary audience that reads this correspondence in the novelistic frame. But there is a third party addressed in Zoo that is known to students of literature as "Big Brother." The end of Zoo thus seems to be reserved for ironies that operate on the third level of the text--the political level.

Letter twenty-nine, the last one in the novel, is addressed to the All-Russian Executive Committee of the Communist Party. In it, the exiled Šklovskij

asks permission to return to Russia without reprisal. At this point, yet another layer of dissimulation enters the novel. For if from the esthetic standpoint Zoo's erotic discourse turned out to be merely the motivation connecting its smaller segments (the letters) into a unified work, from the political standpoint the whole novel might be viewed as a pretext for a plea for mercy. This is at least what Šklovskij tells the Executive Committee. "Don't be surprised that this letter follows some letters written to a woman. I'm not getting a love affair involved in this matter. The woman I was writing to never existed. . . . Alja is the actualization of a metaphor. I invented a woman and love in order to make a book about misunderstanding, about alien people, about an alien land. I want to go back to Russia. . . . I raise my arm [notice the singular] and surrender" (103-4; 105).

But once again the question arises: should this final letter be taken at face value? Is it the point at which the seemingly inexhaustible ironist reached the limits of his double-talk? Which is to say, after much idle beating around the bush, have I finally stumbled upon the key that endows Zoo with a unitary and straightforward meaning? Of course not. The concluding letter of Zoo is a false ending in both Šklovskij's sense, i.e., as a necessary capping of the epistolary exchange that could otherwise go on forever,⁷ and my sense, i.e., as the ultimate limit for the ironies that unfold in Zoo.

This claim is supported in part by certain ambiguities that appear in letter twenty-nine itself, most conspicuously Šklovskij's plea that the massacre of Erzerum not be repeated on him. As he explains, after the fall of this city in World War I, the Russian soldiers killed many Turkish defenders by mistake because they did not understand the Oriental sign of surrender--the raising of the right arm. Does this episode indicate merely a half-hearted (or one-handed) capitulation

on Šklovskij's part, or does it suggest that the Soviet code of behavior is actually as foreign to him as the European one for which Alja has been the metaphor? We might suspect the latter from the evidence of letter three, where an oppressive government (the Romans who crucified Christ) is explicitly compared to a woman rejecting her suitor. The punishment the two inflict upon an innocent man, Šklovskij insists, springs from the same source: the lack of a common language between the tormenter and his victim. "The state is not responsible for the death of human beings. During the time of Christ, it did not understand the Aramaic language and it invariably fails to understand the language of humanity." Likewise, "love too understands neither Aramaic nor Russian. Love is like the nails used to pierce hands" (19-20; 24-25).

The letter to the Executive Committee raises the issue of who wrote Alja's letter. If as Šklovskij informs the Party, Alja is a mere figment of his imagination, then he is the sole author of the entire correspondence. But at this moment the attentive reader will recollect that the issue of authorship has already been thrashed out in the introduction to letter nineteen. Once the reader returns to this letter, however, he realizes that letter twenty-nine, despite its actual position, is not the final letter of the novel and, moreover, that something funny is going on. Let me explain.

Letter nineteen is a message from Alja which Šklovskij puts "under erasure," i.e., crosses out. In it the sick Alja reminisces about her wet nurse Steša, who emerges as the prototypical Russian woman. Alja tells us that she not only was brought up by Steša but also resembles her more than her own mother. This portrait of Alja contradicts not only her Western image in all the other letters but the very structuring principle of the novel, which, as the "Author's Preface" tells us, "is built on a dispute between people of two cultures" (4; 9): the West European Alja and the Russian Viktor Borisovič Šklovskij.

Šklovskij's words do not square with the image he is trying to project of a humble supplicant eager to placate the almighty Big Brother. But is Šklovskij aware of this fact? Most likely yes, for as he states explicitly in his introduction to letter nineteen, one of his reasons for including this letter was precisely to provide a second interpretation of himself.

And how does Viktor Šklovskij emerge from this second interpretation? Well, as a rather self-destructive fellow. He sets up his love affair in such a way as to fail. As he confesses in the introduction to letter nineteen: "I had to be broken while abroad and I found myself a love that would do the job. And without even looking at the woman, I immediately assumed that she didn't love me. I don't say that she would have loved me otherwise. But everything was predestined" (70-71; 74). The seduction of the Communist Party seems equally ill-conceived. Šklovskij's surrender to his political enemies is half-hearted, as if he wished to be rejected or even punished by those to whose will he succumbs in such a mocking fashion. Masochism seems to be the most appropriate label for this kind of behavior.

This second interpretation of Šklovskij is supported by some textual evidence. In Zoo, the image of our hero prostrating himself at Alja's feet is repeated over and over again. But the autobiographical Sentimental Journey is especially rich in such masochism. For example, in one episode, while escaping across the ice to Finland in 1922--the cold road that ultimately took him to Berlin--Šklovskij met a woman. When the Finns arrested the two of them, this woman "couldn't say enough good things about Finland, of which she had seen only about two square yards. But there is a worse grief," Šklovskij continues, "the grief that comes when a man has been tortured so long that he becomes 'crazed,' that is, out of his mind. They used to use the term 'crazed' to describe a man

tortured on the rack. The man is being tortured. All around him is only the cold, hard wood of the rack; but the hands of the executioner or his assistant, though hard, are warm and human. And the man on the rack rubs his cheek against those warm hands which hold him to inflict the torture. That is my nightmare" (163;229). Despite appearances, Šklovskij's two griefs have something in common. They are linked through negative parallelism: the first is the grief of exile, the other of returning home. And Šklovskij makes rather clear which one he considers the more cruel.

However, I did not invoke the notion of masochism to discuss its imagistic content in Šklovskij's writings. What intrigues me about his masochism are the rules that govern it. For I believe that Šklovskij's practice of irony is generated by the same set of rules that underlie the masochistic fantasy. These rules stem from a deep-seated paradox: the masochist is someone who seeks pleasure through displeasure. Let us say that through bodily pain he achieves his objective. But at the very moment this pain gratifies his need for displeasure, it turns itself into pleasure, thus frustrating the masochist's original design. A better strategy would appear to be to avoid displeasure as much as possible and in this way deny oneself the pleasure of displeasure. However, the futility of this effort is patent. By preventing himself from reaching the displeasure that would gratify his drive, the masochist punishes himself and once again subverts his own game.

At this point I should perhaps return to my original definition of irony, for by now it is quite obvious why I considered it provisional. In traditional irony, which I characterized by means of Sterne's statement, the ultimate control seems to be in the hands of the ironist. Only he knows precisely what is going on in the discourse--which information is concealed and which communicated.

But a masochistic ironist like Šklovskij abnegates his role as arbitor. There is no way to decide between a dishonest and a sincere utterance in his discourse. The specific value of any statement is a function of the multiple and mutually incompatible variables of readings. This discourse is generated by the paradoxes within it, and lacks a controlling subject. As Šklovskij insisted in the "Author's Preface" to Zoo, this book simply "wrote itself" (3; 9), or, according to a later account, the actual novel he produced was completely different from the one he intended.⁹

Perhaps the difference between the Sternean and Šklovskian modes of irony can be summed up in the following way. Sterne, it seems, believed that authors can make a free choice between two alternatives: either "to make others understand their meaning, or else to keep their meaning concealed." But Šklovskij doubted the freedom of such a choice and opted for a third alternative, whose advantage (and drawback) is that it does not exist. "There are two roads now," Šklovskij said in assessing his situation in 1926. "To leave, dig in, earn money outside of literature and write for oneself at home. Or, to go on describing life and honestly seeking new social forms [byt] and the correct ideology. There is no third road. But this is the one that should be taken."¹⁰

Notes

1. The first number in the parentheses refers to the pagination of A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922, tr. R. Sheldon (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970); the second number to Sentimentalnoe putešestvie: Vospominanija 1917-1922 (Moscow, 1923). My quotations from this text are taken, with some slight alterations, from R. Sheldon's translation.
2. The first number in the parentheses refers to the pagination Zoo, or Letters not about Love, tr. R. Sheldon (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971); the second number to Zoo, ili pis'ma ne o ljubvi (Berlin, 1923). My quotations from this text are taken, with some slight alterations, from R. Sheldon's translation.
3. "Meditation on Obscurity in Writing," Yorick's Meditations upon Interesting and Important Subjects (London, 1760), p. 68.
4. "Iskusstvo, kak priëm," O teorii prozy (Moscow, 1929), pp. 18-20.
5. Since I do not have the second edition of Zoo I am completely dependent upon R. Sheldon's translation.
6. See, e.g., A Sentimental Journey (233; 328).
7. "Stroenie rasskaza i romana," O teorii prozy, p. 73.

8. See, e.g., "Parodijnyj roman: Tristram Šendi Sterna," O teorii prozy, pp. 177-80.
9. "Recenzija na ètu knigu," Gamburskij sčët (Leningrad, 1928), p. 108.
10. "O svobode iskusstva," Tret'ja fabrika (Moscow, 1926), p. 84.