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Better Practices in Mourning

Don't you hate people who are stuck in the third stage of grief? Forget which one that is? I don't like people who forget things like that, but I'm working on acceptance (that's the fifth stage). Bargaining is the third stage. After denial and anger. But the worst thing is when people skip stages. And if you think that's not serious, think about the Spartans at Thermopylae or, better yet, Russian formalism. Not that there's any comparison between literary criticism and death, but process is process.

I know what you're going to say. Have I finished any of those novels about my brother's death? Strictly speaking, that's irrelevant. And even if I hadn't, wouldn't that just make me a more credible authority on this issue? Who knows better than I do what a bad idea bargaining is? In a dream, I saw my brother. He wanted to rejoin the living but I begged him not to. "You'll just have to go through it all over again." That's what bargaining will get you.

I identify with Viktor Shklovsky. This might seem preposterous, because he's famous for founding Russian formalism; and me? I'm famous for my brownies and French-style bread. Death is, however, a famous leveler. Shklovsky also had a sibling who died young. Although his sister died in Petrograd during the Russian Civil War and my brother died in Berkeley during the Reagan years, I see similarities. Domestic goddesses no less than literary critics can fail to live up to best practices in mourning.

You want to know if I've read Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose*? (Is that a stereotype about domestic goddesses speaking?) I'm glad you brought that up, because I agree that his study of the "internal laws that govern literature" has a lot in common with Kubler-Ross's study of death and dying for the simple reason that both violate Trotskyist principles. Chapter Five of Trotsky's "Literature and Revolution" critiques Formalist literary criticism, specifically Shklovsky, for failing to make the Marxist link between socio-economic conditions and

literature. If only Shklovsky had lived up to Trotsky's accusations, he would have been more like Kubler-Ross, less like a certain domestic goddess, and a better literary critic.

Not that Trotsky was not perfectly correct in accusing Shklovsky of ignoring literature's socio-economic conditions. Those who admired Shklovsky and those who did not agreed on this point. Shklovsky himself famously said, "Art was always free of life, and its color never reflected the color of the flag which waved over the fortress of the City." Nevertheless, he was no Kubler-Ross. She did for death and dying what Shklovsky could only aspire to do for language and literature. It was Kubler-Ross, not, as Trotsky claimed, Shklovsky, who managed to find "precise criteria for classification and valuation" in order to create a universal system of "complete abstraction," transcending "history."

In other words, although Kubler-Ross's *Death and Dying* is based on her two-and-a-half years of observing patients at the University of Chicago's Billings Hospital, she made sure that the book's numerous illustrative vignettes do not betray that fact. The book's location has a laboratory's sterility. The patients, identified by single letters and gender only, are as anonymous as guinea pigs. Kubler-Ross's stages live up not only to Trotsky's criticism but also to a scientific ideal of perfect, faceless, placeless objectivity.

Why did Shklovsky fail to live up to Trotsky's criticism? What can you expect of a movement that got its start in a St. Petersburg café frequented by the avant-garde? A visiting Muscovite called it a very "Petersburgian place, affected... made-up, even slick," exemplified, in part, by a man being offered perfumed face powder as he left the lavatory. In December 1913, Viktor Shklovsky, then a nineteen-year-old freshman studying philology at Petersburg University, delivered a paper at the Stray Dog Café that became a founding document of Russian formalism. "The Place of Futurism in the History of Language" was retitled "The Resurrection of the Word" the following year. Words needed resurrecting, because they had died from overuse: "We do not sense the familiar..." Dead words deaden our awareness of life, but not Trotsky's, or Kubler-Ross's version of life. The polemics between Trotsky and Shklovsky over literary criticism focused on their differences about the nature of art, assuming that they agreed on what life meant.

Perhaps the polemical, political nature of Russian literary criticism blinded Shklovsky to the fact that he recognized a different form of life than Trotsky's. Shklovsky's theoretical blindspot is all the more remarkable because a key term in his Formalist theory defined the relationship between art and his view of life. *Ostrananie* is his neologism, resisting translation. It has most commonly been translated as "defamiliarize" or "make strange," more recently, as *enstrange*. Without art, left to our own devices, we lapse into unconscious and automatic responses to our lives. Art's devices, on the other hand, enstrange, make strange, or defamiliarize life to make us conscious of what we stand to lose. Shklovsky's theory of prose is also a theory of life.

The life we risk losing is not the life of flags and fortresses. The nineteen-year-old Shklovsky laments, "we have lost our awareness of the world; we are like a violinist who has ceased to feel the bow and the strings, we have ceased to be artists in everyday life, we do not love our houses and clothes." Did I hesitate to compare the great founder of Russia's Formalist method to a domestic goddess? That must have been my stereotype about literary theorists speaking.

Shklovsky did in fact take an interest in cooking and even nutrition. Famine will do that to a person. Want some hints on how to make soup out of oat flour? Puzzled about what to do if the herring is not exactly fresh? Wondering why fat is an important part of your diet? Then Shklovsky's *Sentimental Journey: Memoirs, 1917-1922* is the book for you. In addition, he passes on some household hints like how to stoke a stove with either books or furniture, and how a family can stay warm with only one overcoat among them. Bread and brownie recipes are not the *sine qua non* of domestic godhead. Death is.

Although Shklovsky's reverence for everyday life in all of its superabundance of daily detail predates World War One, that war and the conflicts that followed raised the stakes on domestic life's importance. In 1914, the year following the presentation of his paper at the Stray Dog Café, Shklovsky went to war instead of university. The pink-cheeked youth exchanged his frock coat for an army uniform. Shklovsky was assigned to the Russian Army's armored car division and sent to Galicia and the Ukraine. Between the evening at the Stray Dog Café and the publication of *Theory of Prose*, there had been fifteen years of war, revolution, and state violence, years that changed

his views about the purpose of art. Whereas the patrons of the Stray Dog were exhorted to value their houses and clothing in order to "kill pessimism," the readers of *Theory of Prose* are cautioned to value their domestic lives and preserve their "fear of war."

War is a form of enstrangement, too. Gunpowder makes the familiar stranger than perfumed face powder did. Men like Shklovsky became domestic deities; furniture became fuel; overcoats, rooms, and people vanished. War enstranges life more than art could, but Shklovsky never says that war makes art superfluous or impossible. On the contrary, war makes art essential. Art can both make us fear war by making us conscious of the life that we risk losing and it can also be a remedy for the losses war inflicts. "And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, we have been given the tool of art." This is poetics as prosthetics. Words can recreate the world.

Trotsky accused Shklovsky of trying to substitute words for deeds, comparing him to the apostle John and the ancient Sophists. Trotsky is taking sides in the ancient debate over the relative value of words and deeds. In Trotsky's version of this debate, words are on the side of belief, whether that belief is the apostle John's belief in God or the Sophist's in social convention. Deeds, according to Trotsky, are on the side of action and the material world. Marxists like Trotsky are on the side of deeds, formalists like Shklovsky on the side of words.

Words are not necessarily the antithesis of deeds. People who value words do not always fail to act or are indifferent to the material world. Trotsky claims that deeds matter more than words in the life of flags and fortresses; but, in Shklovsky's life of furniture, food, clothes, and marriage, words *are* deeds. Words are the deeds of Shklovsky's social world. Shklovsky was "more at home amidst the noise of the literary café than in the calm atmosphere of the university classroom" because he preferred the noise of many, free-flowing conversations over the calm of a single, controlled one.

The movement that got its start at the Stray Dog continued in the apartment of Lily and Osip Brik. Roman Jakobson recalls that Shklovsky virtually lived in that apartment where the Briks kept "a table laid all day, where there was kolbasa, bread, cheese, and tea all the time. A samovar would be brought in. Whoever wanted to talk would come in." Intellectual life was social life for Shklovsky. He was

so unhappy living in Berlin, apart from his circle, that he renounced his Formalist method in order to be allowed to return to Russia; unlike Roman Jakobson who moved to Prague to continue to develop Formalism. Another habitué of the Stray Dog, the futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov, invented a new language so that words could be restored to what he considered their original function: namely to "dispel enmity and make the future transparent and peaceful;" because "[n]owadays sounds... serve the purposes of hostility." War puts our social lives at risk.

In Trotsky's kind of life, deeds are important but the people who do them are not. The problems of life that Trotsky identifies in his book by that title are institutional. He proposes the creation of new institutions for education, marriage, and religion to repair the damage of war and continue the work of revolution. Institutions are social machines in which the people are replaceable parts. Not so social life. Social life depends on particular people. State terror perpetuated the damage to social life inflicted by war. Roman Jakobson moved to the United States to Shklovsky's dismay. Khlebnikov died of untreated disease and malnutrition at the age of thirty-six. The once hospitable Osip Brik joined the Cheka, the notorious secret police. Shklovsky's brother and sister died in their twenties: his brother was shot; his sister died from an unidentified disease. Khlebnikov's new language would not have been enough to dispel the forces jeopardizing a transparent, peaceful future. It is not simply words but the people who speak them that matter.

When people and the details of their daily lives matter, the dichotomy between words and deeds collapses. Shklovsky was interested in what people both said and did. In addition to the cooking and household hints, *Sentimental Journey* provides advice on riding trams, car repair, medical treatment, and other activities. Because Shklovsky seems to be less concerned with making life strange than with making it known, he has been criticized for scholarly inconsistency and/or surrendering to political pressure. The new genre it exemplified was dubbed "factography." Factography contradicted his theory of prose but was consistent with his theory of life. Shklovsky's words attempt to recreate his world.

But resurrecting words resurrects neither things nor people. A prosthetic poetics was doomed to fail, as Shklovsky would have known.

He was also a bomb expert. *Sentimental Journey* describes his near-fatal injuries and the subsequent hospitalizations during which he saw people who had lost limbs, including two young men who had been castrated by their injuries. Prosthetics improved during World War One, because the need increased. Improvements in medical care meant more people who survived catastrophic injuries would then need prosthetic limbs. Replacing limbs does not negate their loss. However excellently the prosthetic limb replaces function, sensation cannot be regained. Prosthetic poetics suffered from the same shortcoming. The written word could not recreate the life that Shklovsky had lost. The written word is silent; it contributes to the calm of the university classroom. Shklovsky missed the spoken words of a noisy social life. Just because words cannot resurrect or be resurrected, however, did not stop me from writing in the hope that the next attempt would do what has never been done. It's a losing bargain.

Shklovsky could not write about his sister's death either. This seems a more significant similarity than the others: our ages, the presence of small children, the absence of our parents, the responsibility, the powerlessness, and the way he described his sister ("My sister Evgenia was the person closest to me. We were very much alike in the face and I could guess her thoughts."). His account of his sister's death is inconclusive, inadequate, and too short. The half-page description would have been much shorter if not for the many one- and two-line paragraphs. For instance: "My sister died suddenly. I was shaken." Shklovsky does not hint at resolution of any kind, not even the kind that makes peace with a lack of resolution. "There's no need to cry. The need is to love the living!" I have speculated about why he repeated "There's no need to cry," a few lines down the page, giving it a paragraph of its own. Whatever his reason, it is certain that Kubler-Ross would not have approved: best practices in mourning, like literary criticism, must have an outcome.

Maybe Shklovsky's sister loved his cooking the way my brother loved mine, although how could the cooking of Berkeley circa Cocolat, Poulet, and Charcuterie—to name a few of my brother's favorite stores—compare with that of Russia even now, aside from faith in the cachet that French imparts? How predictable that I would balk at the most trivial of comparisons. No wonder I'm still working on acceptance. Following Kubler-Ross's stages depends on a willingness

to make comparisons so bold as to overlook not only all differences of age, gender, race, class, religion, ethnicity, continent, or century, but also all the details that domestic deities hold sacred. Simply comparing myself to Shklovsky, by overlooking the differences between starving Petrograd, 1919, and sybaritic Berkeley, 1983, does not meet her stringent standards of faceless, placeless objectivity. Domestic deities are too attached to things to follow mourning's best practices.

To domestic deities, the kind of acceptance Kubler-Ross offers is not worth having. We're thoroughly and exclusively corporeal. Nothing short of resurrection will satisfy us. Kubler-Ross's acceptance is purely spiritual, simply a psychological state. I want it anyway, because watching the movie version of a cartoon version of the Spartans at Thermopylae is no way to mark the anniversary of my brother's death. I know what you're going to say. Don't I know that Kubler-Ross's process led her to conduct séances, to seeing and speaking to her dead? Yes, I do.