

Literature, Theatre, and Estrangement: A Review Article of New Work by Fanger, Jestrovic, and Robinson

Gregory Byala
Temple University

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Gregory BYALA

**Literature, Theatre, and Estrangement:
A Review Article of New Work by Fanger, Jestrovic, and Robinson**

Contemporary interest in Soviet literature is made clear by the recent publication of works by Mikhail Bulgakov, Daniil Kharms, Vasily Grossman, Leonid Tyspkin, and others. Of particular interest is Donald Fanger's newly translated edition of Maxim Gorky, *Gorky's Tolstoy and Other Reminiscences* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008). In addition to Gorky's famous sketches, the edition contains selections from Gorky's *Diary* as well as portraits of him written by Khodasevich, Zamiatin, Eikhenbaum, and Adamovich. Together with Fanger's introduction, the collection illustrates the evolving reception Gorky received in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. Regarding revisionist readings from the past decade, Fanger calls for a measured reassessment of Gorky, one that accounts for his complicated relationships with Bolshevism and Stalinism. The details of Gorky's life have long been shrouded in mystery, in part because he systematically erased most traces of his personal biography, and in part because the machinery of Soviet censorship ensured that a good deal of information remained unseen until recently. In this respect, the history of Gorky's reception (particularly in the West) mirrors the historical reception of Russian literary theory in particular and Russian literature more broadly.

The work of Viktor Shklovsky presents a particularly interesting case. As with other Russian theorists including Mikhail Bakhtin, the majority of Shklovsky's work remained unavailable to English-speaking readers until the second half of the twentieth century. For example, originally published in 1925, the complete text of Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* (Trans. Benjamin Sher. Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive, 1990) did not appear in English until 1990. Prior to its full emergence, the discussion of defamiliarization in the arts was confined largely to investigations of Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdung* and José Ortega y Gasset's *Dehumanization of Art*, which also appeared in 1925. The uneven distribution of its texts has caused the historical legacy of Russian Formalism to remain slightly confused. In confronting this problem, Douglas Robinson's *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008) and Silvija Jestrovic's *Theatre of Estrangement* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006) attempt to disambiguate Shklovsky's notion of *ostranenie* from the broader sense of alienation that has come to dominate the discussion. The term *ostranenie* has been variously translated into English. Although Benjamin Sher's 1990 translation coined the English word "enstrangement" to account for the semantic range of Shklovsky's Russian, both Robinson and Jestrovic employ the term "estrangement."

Robinson's investigation of estrangement is tied to a larger conceptual project that aligns the materiality of language and literary texts with the neurobiological processes that help to explain the complex pattern of fellow-feeling. Estrangement equally describes the process through which a text disfigures the habitual world and the condition of the modern individual who finds himself alienated from both his own identity and the world that surrounds him. For Robinson, these two aspects of estrangement relate dialectically with one another, insofar as the literary technique is seen as a palliative to the psychological experience of alienation. The central figures in Robinson's study are Tolstoy, Shklovsky, and Brecht. Tolstoy is the starting point for Robinson in part because he is the starting point for Shklovsky, who uses Tolstoy's texts to formulate (or defend) his theory of *ostranenie*. However, rather than pursue Shklovsky's sense of Tolstoy, Robinson moves quickly to Tolstoy's own theory of art, which does not conform to Shklovsky's or necessarily prepare for it. Instead, Tolstoy's theory of infection is marshaled largely because it supports Robinson's larger assumption about what he calls "the somatics of literature." Robinson's analysis yields an unfamiliar Tolstoy, one who does not recall immediately the figure emerging from Gorky's reminiscence. For Robinson, the major achievement of Tolstoy's art results from what Robinson diagnoses as Tolstoy's depersonalization disorder. The psychic tension Robinson discovers emerges from the conflict between Tolstoy's inability to submit himself to collectivity and his ability to create characters who can: "Since I want here to read him as anticipating the modernist estrangement theories of Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht," Robinson writes, "I seek ... to denormalize him, to explore the ways in which his often contradictory idealization of the utopian exchange of feelings grows out of his inability to experience that exchange himself and thus out of his need to imagine it by 'remote control,' as it were, by guessing at its collectivized emotional contours intellectually" (43). While interestingly conceived, Robinson's Tolstoy bears little relation to the more recognized portraits of the writer. In comparison with Fanger's translation of Gorky, the discrepancy becomes apparent.

Although he is capable of fits of isolation that deny him both the comfort of others and the possibility of reaching out to them, Gorky's Tolstoy is susceptible to feeling. He is so prone to the exasperating emotion of other people's pain that he is often reduced in Gorky's reminiscence to tears. Responding, for instance, to Leopold Sulerzhitsky's support of anarchism, Gorky's Tolstoy remarks, "We all look for freedom from our obligations to others, while it's precisely that feeling of obligation to others that makes us human" (24). Robinson's notion of "ideosomatic guidance" is not very far removed from Tolstoy's sense of obligation, precisely because this obligation toward others arises in him as feeling, as a bodily sensation that reinforces social responsibility and constitutes our humanity. The language of feeling emerges once more when Tolstoy addresses himself to Gorky's class: "I am more of a peasant than you, and can feel things the way peasants do better than you can" (42). In these moments, Tolstoy appears in Gorky's text as a man who is nearly overrun with emotion, as one who feels the need to fend off the debilitating sensation of experiencing others' emotions too keenly. At other times, Gorky's Tolstoy is precisely the sort of recluse that Robinson considers him to be: one who is profoundly alienated from the world in which he has the great misfortune to reside. In these alternate moments, Gorky's Tolstoy appears immune to, or openly to reject, what Robinson calls "normative regulation by the ideosomatic Other," which is essentially a kind of acculturation through shared feelings. As Gorky describes it, this kind of alienation sounds like the necessary condition for the variety of estrangement that Tolstoy's texts exhibit: "At times you have the impression that he has just arrived from somewhere far away, where people think differently, feel and relate to each other differently, even more differently from us, and speak in another language. He sits in a corner, tired, gray, as if covered with the dust of some other earth, observing everybody attentively with the eyes of an alien and a mute" (45). In this description of him, Tolstoy resides uneasily in the world around him. The distance that is written on his face is likewise the index of his isolation from those around him. Even if this gives him access to the language of others, it does so at the expense of his proximity to those who share his most immediate space.

The most substantial statement Gorky provides along these lines comes from the unfinished letter that rounds out his memoir:

Yes, he is great! I am utterly convinced that beyond everything he talks about there is a great deal about which he remains silent, even in his diary — remains silent, and will probably never speak to anyone. This "something" would only occasionally get hinted at in his conversation, as it is hinted at in the two diaries he gave me and L.A. Sulerzhitsky to read; I see it as something like the "denial of all affirmations" — a profound and evil nihilism that has sprung up on the soil of an endless and intractable despair and loneliness, of a sort that probably no one before him ever experienced with such appalling clarity. He has often struck me as a man who is fundamentally, in the depths of his soul, indifferent to people, being so much higher and more powerful than they that they all seem like midges to him, and their frantic concerns ludicrous and pitiable. He has gone too far off from them into some wilderness where, concentrating all the powers of his spirit to the utmost, he gazes in solitude at "the main thing" — death. (53)

If anything, Gorky's Tolstoy is more ambivalent than Robinson's. In his attempt to "denormalize him," Robinson enlists both Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic and her concept of abjection to evaluate what Robinson describes as Tolstoy's fear of women. In several senses, this psychological portrait of Tolstoy, which is meant explain the motivation behind his defamiliarizing tendencies, is irrelevant to the discussion of estrangement itself. It emerges in the text as a component of Robinson's larger critical project but somehow feels distinct from the central notion of estrangement that arranges the book's focus.

Returning to *Theory of Prose*, it is clear that Tolstoy interested Shklovsky primarily as a technical writer, as one who deployed literary techniques for the purpose of revitalizing the reader's engagement with the world. In "Art as Device," the first and probably most famous essay in the collection, Shklovsky describes Tolstoy's techniques as follows: "The devices by which Tolstoy estranges his material may be boiled down to the following: he does not call a thing by its name, that is, he describes it as if it were perceived for the first time, while an incident is described as if it were happening for the first time" (6). Although his method is distinctly Formalist, some measure of psychology underwrites Shklovsky's theory. However, it is not the psychology of the author that is at stake, but the reader. As both Robinson and Jestrovic note, Russian Formalism anticipates later developments in reader-response criticism, which conceives the text as incomplete, as something that only comes to full meaning in the imaginative exchange between it and the reader. Shklovsky is interested in the circuit between the reader and the text rather than the circuit between the author's psychology and the production of the text. He is interested in detailing the devices by which the text estranges the objects of

the world for the reader. The aim of this technique is to bring us into more immediate relation with the object of our observation: "The purpose of the image is not to draw our understanding closer to that which the 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 the object rather than mere 'recognition'" (10). According to Tolstoy, the work of art infects the reader with the artist's ideas. This can be positive (in the case of good art) or negative (in the case of decadent art). Although they both imagine the interaction between the text and the reader as a circuit, the two theories are different. Tolstoy's text, while active, mediates between the author and the reader. It is in essence a conduit of infection, an agent in the process of transference. Shklovsky's text does not carry any bacteria of its own, nor is it promotional in any way. For Tolstoy, on the other hand, the text is never neutral — never simply an impetus to move or to feel; it is a vessel for the transference of meaning. Aligning them this way makes clear that Robinson's desire to present Shklovsky's theory as either a corollary to Tolstoy's or an extension — as a theory that equally conceives of the passage from text to reader as one that is activated through the same type of bodily transference — remains problematic.

Robinson's decision to read Shklovsky through Hegel, which emerges in Part Two of his study, is undertaken to answer the charge levied against Shklovsky that he was exclusively concerned with literary form. Although he did not read Hegel, Robinson's Shklovsky is nonetheless an idealist in Hegel's mode, which means that he is chiefly dialectical in his reasoning. Drawing on Hegel's theory of consciousness, Robinson argues that automatization, or the act of seeing the world habitually, amounts (for Shklovsky) to an erosion of the self's sense of being in the world. When the object is externalized (alienated), it ceases to exist because its own being is dialectically involved in the fullness of the perceiving consciousness. By conceiving Shklovsky's thought this way, Robinson can explain how poetry performs the intricate function of dialectical de-alienation that he ascribes to literary estrangement. If the world is merely Idea, the imagination is effective against it. The idealist side of Robinson's argument sits somewhat uneasily against his own somatic theory, insofar as the latter is underwritten by a neurobiological notion of empathy and exchange that is grounded in the body itself, in the material transference of feeling and regulation. For Robinson, ideosomatic transfer is not a metaphor for the process of socialization; it is instead an embodied process that can be explained at the biological level.

The defense of Russian Formalism that Robinson stages through his Hegelian reading of Shklovsky differs from the one Jestrovic makes in her *Theatre of Estrangement: Theatre, Practice, Ideology*. In his analysis, Robinson does not offer a historical side to Formalism but a humanist one, a side rooted ultimately in feeling. In comparison with Robinson, Jestrovic's claim for the significance of estrangement is broader. In her estimation, estrangement is the dominant aesthetic mode of the historical avant-garde (1910-1935). In her opening chapter, Jestrovic maps the historical developments that gave rise to the theory and practice of estrangement. Not surprisingly, she enlists many of the elements that are traditionally seen as harbingers of modernism more broadly, including new theories of perception, Freud's discovery of the unconscious, and technological advances. Without stating it openly, Jestrovic suggests that estrangement, even when not articulated as a theory that gives rise to artistic practice, is the central mode through which modernism expresses itself. The desire to make new becomes for Jestrovic a desire to see the habitual world in new ways. Modernism is therefore bound up for Jestrovic with the poetics of sight and not—as it would be for Robinson—the poetics of feeling. Jestrovic's introduction challenges the belief that Brecht's *Verfremdung* is the primary theory of defamiliarization, noting instead that his "theory and theatre might be just one model within a diverse range of avant-garde practices" (5). In an attempt to unseat Brecht's theory, Jestrovic traces its most significant elements back to their sources in the Russian avant-garde. Even Brecht's interest in Asian theatre derives from his trip to Moscow, where he saw the Beijing Opera perform. Detailing the cultural exchange between Moscow and Berlin, Jestrovic draws tacitly attention to the fact that Brecht's theories have been accorded historical precedence largely because the foundational texts of Russian Formalism remained untranslated for decades. However, Jestrovic does not simply suggest that Brecht's *Verfremdung* is essentially Shklovsky's theory, translated into German. Like Robinson, she notes that *ostranenie* and *Verfremdung* are distinct in several important senses. Speaking of the differences, which she sees largely as a distinction between technique and ideology, Jestrovic writes as follows: "*Verfremdung* in theatre shows alienation (*Entfremdung*) as a matter of causality, as a historical and alterable situation, not as a human condition. Therefore, alienation (*Entfremdung*) is the subject matter of Brecht's theatre, while *Verfremdung* (estrangement or in Russian *ostranenie*) is the methodological procedure of representing and distancing that subject matter" (21). Estrangement is particularly suited to the stage because theater negotiates constantly the troubled relationship between its own reality and the illusion it depicts. Theatrical illusion relies on elements beyond language,

on the stage and its inhabitants, all of which must be seen and not seen for the illusion to be taken for real and the real to become illusory. Although Brecht and Shklovsky receive ample attention, perhaps the true focus of Jestrovic's study, at least of its opening sections, is Vsevolod Meyerhold, who emerges as the animating spirit behind theatrical estrangement. Speaking of the ways in which Meyerhold's practices undermined the naturalist stage Stanislavsky helped develop, Jestrovic notes that his work "is a case study for demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between theatrical *ostranenie* and transtheatricality" (61).

Continuing the defense of Formalism, Chapter Four of *Theatre of Estrangement* addresses the complex relationship between form and ideology. For Jestrovic, both Shklovsky and Brecht have been misread on this front. In pursuing critical misconceptions about them, Jestrovic targets specifically Fredric Jameson, claiming that he overlooks Shklovsky's principle contribution to the argument about literary form: namely, that it is content. Granting this identification, Jestrovic argues that it is impossible for the political or social meaning of a text to exist outside of its formal/aesthetic dimensions. In her reading of it, the Formalist commitment to the object was a strategic response to the prevailing and worn-out conventions of the Russian academy. Echoing Barthes, Jestrovic asserts that, in his attention to perceptibility, which in and of itself entails change, Shklovsky's formalism does not withdraw in full from historical reality. Although limited, Formalism contains a historical dimension: the specific history it reveals is the history of aesthetic forms, which (as the Structuralists have claimed) contain inherently social and political properties. Jestrovic is also quick to dismiss Jameson's reading of Brecht, claiming that Jameson mistakes Brechtian methodology as purely doctrinal. Extending out from this critique, Jestrovic details the conflicting ways in which Marxist theorists view Brecht, particularly when it comes to the intersection of art and ideology in his works. The shortcoming of most Marxist readings, she argues, is that scholars take the political content of Brecht's theater for granted and, in so doing, overlook the degree to which his process, as well as his ideology, evolved.

Together, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature* and *Theatre of Estrangement* attempt to refocus our understanding of both the historical development of estrangement and its ideological content. In accordance with the resurgent interest in Soviet Literature and theory that Fanger's edition of Gorky signals, both return to Russian sources in their attempts to understand a literary concept that has extended well beyond Russia's literary and geographic borders. Beginning their investigations of estrangement with Tolstoy and Meyerhold respectively, Robinson and Jestrovic arrive at slightly different maps of its development. What they have in common, however, is a precise and impressive attention to scholarly detail. Rather than settle permanently the notion of what estrangement is or how it functions, these two studies combine to broaden our understanding of it as both an occasion in the history of artistic ideas and a methodology for both the representation and disruption of the world.

Reviewer's profile: Gregory Byala teaches writing and literature at Temple University. His reviews and essays have appeared in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*, and *Theatre Journal*. E-mail: <gregory.byala@temple.edu>