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# Introduction. Dialogues with Shklovsky: The Duvakin Interviews 1967-1968.

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# Dialogues with Shklovsky

The Duvakin Interviews  
1967–1968

Edited by Slav N. Gratchev  
and Irina Evdokimova  
Translated by Slav N. Gratchev

LEXINGTON BOOKS  
*Lanham • Boulder • New York • London*

# Introduction

By Irina Evdokimova  
and Slav N. Gratchev

Viktor Shklovsky, whose dialogues with Duvakin you are about to read, lived a long life, full of events, travels, losses, and recoveries. Seventy-five years of this life were dedicated to literature where he managed to put himself on both sides of barricades—as a writer and as a literary critic. It is interesting that despite international recognition as a scholar, Shklovsky always remained, for himself a writer who not only liked to create stories but also liked to find out how stories had been made. As Eva Thompson noted, Shklovsky was so much an ichthyologist that one day he eventually turned into a fish.<sup>1</sup> It is not often that the scientist merges with the subject of his study and does so successfully.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that for us literary scholars that Shklovsky is, first of all, one of the authors of the theory of *Ostranenie*—when art and literature make the boring and practical world look strange again and, by doing so, refresh our perception of it.

This book captures the moments when Shklovsky informally talked with a retired professor of Moscow University Victor Duvakin who was in search of interesting people of the 20th century—people that miraculously survived the Stalin repressions, famines, and WWII, and who were still around. Duvakin found 295 such people, and among them were Mikhail Bakhtin, Victor Shklovsky, Dmitry Shostakovich, Nadezhda Mandelstam, Alexander Pasternak (brother of the famous writer Boris Pasternak), and many others. The dialogues with them were recorded on tapes and carefully stored in boxes so that someday, someone already living in the 21st century, could unpack them, transcribe them and, possibly, translate them. This work, luckily, has

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<sup>1</sup>Eva Thompson. “Victor Shklovsky, or Fish Turned Ichthyologist.” (*Books Abroad* Winter 1973) v. 47, number 1, 79–82.

already started: in 2018, *Dialogues with Bakhtin* came out for the first time. This monumental work was done by two professors and enthusiasts who not only translated the unique phono-document but also supplied more than 600 invaluable commentaries that placed those dialogues into historical and political context of the epoch.

This book is organized the same way: the dialogues with Shklovsky were recorded on tape by Victor Duvakin in 1967–1968 when Shklovsky was already 76 years old. But his memory is amazing, considering his very advanced age: he cites pieces of poems and Engels and Marx, and recalls the most vital, intimate details of historic encounters—details that would help us reconstruct reality. The importance of his recollections is obvious: no one who would try to write today about the dramatic relationship of Mayakovsky and Lilya Brick because they could not know the *exact* context when such and such an event or conversation took place, and what *exactly* was said. The only person who would be able to give a more or less accurate account of those events is the one who witnessed them. Someone who was either present, or spoke personally with one of the participants and remembers their *exact* perception of what had just happened.

But these people are gone now, and we will never be able to hear their voices again. Unless . . . unless we happen to find their voices in Duvakin's collection that is now stored in Moscow Scientific Library.

Today, when all the discussions about Formalists are over, people often do not remember why many years ago Shklovsky, and others with him, received the derogatory nickname—Formalists. But the fact is that they, for the first time in literary scholarship, did exactly what they are still remembered for today: they shifted their attention to the *form* of the artifact instead of collecting numerous, and often useless, facts. Why is *Don Quixote* a novel, and not a poem? Why is *Chile Harold's Pilgrimage* a poem, and not a novel? Those seemingly simple questions require quite difficult answers. Then the second set of questions comes: How are *Don Quixote* and *Chile Harold* made? And at this moment, those “formalists” (as they were initially called by the retrogrades), all of a sudden became The Formalists. Why? Because they, for the first time ever, were able to offer answers to these burning and very important questions. So, the nickname, called to offend, has turned into a brand. The brand soon become known all over the world (even though there was not Internet, or e-mail!), and numerous linguistic schools in different parts of the world started to get inspiration from those few Russian scholars locked in the vast spaces of the “most free land” that after the first days of the Revolution painstakingly erected the “Iron Curtain” so that even the bird would not be able to leave the country without written permission of the Communist Party.

Very soon this “curtain” would close the country from the outside world, and in the darkness of the night the massive arrests would start. People—and

most often the best people, the cream of the crop of the country—were arrested in the middle of the night, taken away for interrogation, and nobody would ever see them again. At that time, Shklovsky found out that he was on the list to be arrested and decided to run, just in time. In the middle of a cold winter in 1922, he crossed, on ice, the Finland bay to land in Finland and ask for refuge. Then he moved to Germany where all Russian intellectuals, blown away by the winds of the ruthless Bolshevik's revolution, gathered together to continue to serve their country, to the best of their limited abilities.

In one year and a half, Shklovsky, drawn by never-ending nostalgia, returned to the USSR where he reunited with his family, and resumed his academic activities. It was not an easy thing to do in the totalitarian country: by 1929 all liberal and independent journals that did not reflect the ideas and goals of the Communist Party were closed. In 1930, to save himself and his family from the inevitable prosecution, Shklovsky had to publish an article titled "Monument of the Scientific Error" where he admitted that Formalism was the mistake. By then, leaders of the former Formalist School had taken different roads: Roman Jakobson fled the USSR; Tomashevsky maintained a low profile, although still he was not able to escape constant and severe criticism; Eikhenbaum (one of the most respected Leo Tolstoy scholars) had to comply with nonsense to save his life; Osip Brik left this world at the age of 47; and Yury Tynyanov died at 49 from multiple sclerosis. Shklovsky survived them all, but not because he was a conformist (like some scholars claimed him to be), but because he was simply fortunate not to fall between a hammer and an anvil. In fact, the Soviet system was hammering blindly, and those who managed to hide at the moment of attack, saved their lives. The hammer was too busy to return and continued its destruction in other places.

For two difficult decades (1933–1953) Shklovsky worked writing screenplays (something that he has already done in 1920s), historical novels, and essays. Studying history was safe at this time of total terror. To be a screenplay writer was also quite innocent; every screenplay was ordered and approved by the Communist Party anyway. Freelance artistic activity was frozen: to become a writer one had to become a member of the Union of Soviet Writers.<sup>2</sup> Without membership, no publishing house would ever publish one's work. So, Shklovsky, in order to continue publishing, for many years had to maintain a prudent balance between what he would love and what he would

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<sup>2</sup>The Union of Soviet Writers was created by the Bolsheviks in 1934 as a vehicle of state control and censorship. Becoming a member of the union meant gaining permission to publish books and earn money by writing. The union also supported its members in "good" standing financially (by giving them nice apartments, country cottages, excellent medical service, and money). To lose one's union membership usually spelled a disaster: the unfortunate writer would never be able to publish anything in the USSR, and would also lose any previous benefits, including, at times, their apartment. In 1934, the union consisted of 1,500 writers; in 1991 (the year when the union was dissolved) it had about 10,000 members.

need to write. We do not believe that anyone should judge him for that: when you live under a totalitarian regime, there is only so much you can do, or say, or you would be crushed by the merciless and powerful totalitarian machine.

The real scholarship was defeated by the “only right point of view—the one of Marx and Lenin”. The scholars sheltered themselves in niches like preparing complete works of Russian and European classics, translating and preparing comments for some special editions. Those comments, of course, had to be scrutinized by the censors first who were on guard to dismantle any “erroneous Western theory”. What kind of discussion, or disagreement could there be with the Communist Party, which knew absolutely everything and could easily give recommendations to Pablo Picasso (if he had lived in USSR!) on how to mix paints to achieve the best possible results!

When one beautiful morning, on March 5, 1953, “the Father of all nations”—this is how Stalin was called in the USSR—finally died, Nikita Khrushchev declared the “anti-Stalin” crusade, and scholars got a breath of fresh air. Shklovsky responded with a brilliant book about Fyodor Dostoevsky—the first serious study of the greatest Russian writer in the last 30 years—since Dostoevsky had not been published or studied in USSR since 1935. His books, although not fully prohibited, were taken away from libraries only because he in one of his novels “dared” to warn that the Socialists, with their crazy ideas about the revolution and the society, would destroy Russia, its culture, and ultimately its people. It is unfortunate that Shklovsky’s former best friend, Roman Jakobson, living in the United States, heavily criticized the book about Dostoevsky; Jakobson could not understand the bleak reality Shklovsky was living in, and could not comprehend that writing such a book was a heroic deed that only the bravest one could do.

The Khrushchev’s thaw did not last for long, and people soon realized that “Soviet freedom” was no more than an illusion that never existed, and never would. The difference now was that people were not arrested so easily, but the Soviet oppressive machine was as powerful as ever: Boris Pasternak who published *Doctor Zhivago* in Italy after being turned down by all the domestic publishers, was defamed, deprived of work, and consigned to oblivion. His heart did not take it lightly, and Pasternak died in about one year, in complete solitude. Even at the funeral, there were only a few of his old friends who did not fear the regime and declared that Russia lost one of its greatest writers and poets. Shklovsky was one of those who came to the funeral of his old, good friend.

The life story of any remarkable person would inevitably become a source of valuable information about his or her era. That is why their memoirs would eventually become the invaluable document for those who study that person’s works, or the era he or she lived in. The only problem with memoirs is that not everything can be trusted to paper, especially in the society that does not

enjoy freedom. Professor Victor Duvakin who, on his own skin, experienced the “gratitude” of his own government when, after 40 years of dedicated service to the university, was dismissed only because he expressed doubts that his former student Andrei Sinyavsky<sup>3</sup> should be reproached heavily for publishing his book in the West. The next day, Duvakin lost his job.

But, as the Spanish proverb says, “No hay mal que por bien no venga” (there is nothing bad that comes without bringing some benefits). Together with the painful dismissal, Duvakin received the long desired freedom to do what he was planning to do for the longest time: interview people who were around when the most dramatic events and changes were happening in our country—the Revolution, the Terror, WWII.

First of all, Duvakin made a list of those he would love to visit: more than 300 people. Unfortunately, some of them died while Duvakin was interviewing others, but the total number of those with whom he had interviews is impressive—295. One of them was Viktor Shkovsky.

So, what makes this book unique and different from others? First of all, you are going to hear the live voice of a person who participated in making history, not studying it from a textbook. Very often, he was a direct participant of the events he discussed; he personally knew some of the most remarkable people of the 20th century; he tells us about those people who forever will remain a mystery to us. We, separated from them by two generations, can only get to know their true personality, their nature, their habits, their preferences, by listening to the voices of those who knew them personally.

His voice is the real reflection of history that he saw by the eyes of the philistine, and not of the scientist. He does not exaggerate anything for the sake of political conjuncture but wants to convey to us images of people once dear to him. He is simply talking about things that he thinks are interesting, or important. He mentions many names he assumes you should know; he expresses his emotions. He is just a real person, relaxed and happy to share his memories.

Our most exciting job was to write commentaries about people Shklovsky mentioned, events that occurred, or references he made. We chose a different way to write those commentaries: in five or six lines, we wanted to give you the quintessence of the person’s life, or the event that is mentioned in the conversation. We tried to be impartial and bring to you only the most interesting

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<sup>3</sup>Andrei Sinyavsky (1925-1997) was a prominent Soviet writer, literary critic, dissident who had to leave his country because of the publication in the West his novels that were prohibited to publish in USSR. When it was discovered, Sinyavsky was arrested and sentenced for 7 years. After return, he emigrated to France when he became a professor of Russian literature in Sorbonne. His radical views on the “Jew question” in Russia provoked a very negative reaction from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Literature Nobel Prize Laureate.

facts. We tried to remove our personal views or opinions about the person or the event we commented on; we want you, and only you, to form your own opinion about the people and historical events.

Therefore, our ultimate goal was not just to give you a simple historical reference—which you could read in many different sources—but instead, we wanted to make you feel interested in those people we commented on. Because of such approach, we tried to make each person commented on into a live participant of the book.