# The Politics of Estrangement: Tracking Shklovsky's Device through Literary and Policing Practices

Cristina Vatulescu
*Society of Fellows, Harvard*

**Abstract**   Critics have frequently accused Russian Formalism of supporting an apolitical separation of art from life. As a central Formalist term, *estrangement* (*ostranenie*) often bore the brunt of this accusation. Taking issue with this critique, this essay focuses on the entangled relationship between the aesthetics and politics of estrangement and argues that an attentive look at the history of estrangement reveals its deep involvement with revolutionary and police state politics. This essay traces estrangement's conflicted development through Victor Shklovsky's oeuvre and beyond, in the work of Nicolae Steinhardt and Joseph Brodsky, and also in secret police interrogation and reeducation practices and in CIA manuals.

In *Sentimental Journey*, Shklovsky wrote that during the civil war, life itself was made strange and became art. Shklovsky's memoirs shed light on the effects of this revolutionary estrangement on the self. Furthermore, the memoirs reenacted this unsettling estrangement by incorporating elements of official Soviet genres, such as the trial deposition, the interrogation autobiography, and the letter to the government. As

Shklovsky suggests, the effects of revolutionary estrangement on the self were certainly not limited to the therapeutic value of refreshing perception that is commonly ascribed to artistic estrangement. Indeed, estrangement of the self was a key device in secret police interrogation and reeducation practices; as such, it was instrumental in the politicized fashioning of the subject during Soviet times. In their confrontations with this police state brand of estrangement, writers like Joseph Brodsky and Nicolae Steinhardt further probed its methods and then appropriated its lessons for their own ends, developing self-estrangement as a new art of survival.

## Interrogating Estrangement

The foremost theorists of literary estrangement, Bertolt Brecht and Victor Shklovsky, shared a preoccupation with being interrogated.

> I often imagine being interrogated by a tribunal.
> "Now tell us, Mr. Brecht, are you really in earnest?"
> Walter Benjamin, 1977

> I give my deposition. I declare. I lived through the revolution
> honestly.
> Shklovsky, 1923

Brecht's and Shklovsky's conversations with imaginary interrogators seem to echo each other, as if Shklovsky answered the question that Brecht feared his interrogator might ask. In fact, Brecht was conversing with Walter Benjamin, who recorded Brecht's words in a diary entry from July 6, 1934, together with a possible clue to this puzzling fascination with interrogations. Benjamin (1977: 88) laconically noted that, in the same conversation, Brecht asserted that "the methods of the GPU [Soviet secret police]" were based on "certain kinds of estrangement" (*Entfremdung*).[1] In the same passage, Brecht used the same word, Entfremdung, to describe Kafka's fiction. Brecht's words assume that there are different kinds of estrangement, such as secret police estrangement and artistic estrangement.[2] But his provoca-

1. The Soviet secret police underwent many name changes (Cheka, GPU, OGPU, NKVD, NKGB, MGB, MVD, KGB); hence the different acronyms that appear in the various quotations that refer to different moments of its history.
2. Brecht coined his famous term *Verfremdung* (estrangement) during his visit to Moscow in 1935. Before that, and thus at the time of his conversation with Benjamin in 1934, "he had used Entfremdung (distancing) for the defamiliarization necessary to stop an event from seeming natural, readily acceptable: in his native dialect, entfremden and verfremden are synonymous" (Hayman 1983: 189). After 1935, Brecht used Entfremdung specifically for estrangement in the Marxist-informed sense of alienation, a negative phenomenon that artistic estrangement (Verfremdung) was designed to expose and resist. By changing the prefix of the existing noun *Ent-* to *Ver-fremdung*, Brecht emphasized the difference between his new term and Marx's negative term; but by choosing to keep the same root, he reminded us of their fundamental connection. Entfremdung's "deformation" into the artistic Verfremdung

tive musings point to a question he left unanswered: What is the relationship between the two estrangements? Could the fascination that the two theorists of artistic estrangement showed for interrogations have something to do with these "certain kinds of estrangement" practiced by the secret police?

To grapple with these questions, I will first turn to the work of Victor Shklovsky, who had firsthand knowledge of the methods of the Soviet secret police, having himself undergone a number of interrogations. The connections between the politics and aesthetics of estrangement in the context of Shklovsky's work have been long overlooked or even denied, even though they have been thoroughly analyzed in the context of Brecht's work. Thus Fredric Jameson (1974: 58) argued that the "purpose" of Brecht's estrangement is "political in the most thoroughgoing sense of the word; it is, as Brecht insisted over and over, to make you aware that the objects and institutions you thought to be natural were really only historical: the result of change, they themselves henceforth became in their turn changeable." By contrast, Jameson charges, Shklovsky's theory of estrangement, which argued that the goal of art is to defamiliarize, make strange, or present the world from unusual angles and thus refresh our routine-dulled perception, suffers from ahistoricity and essentialism, since it is based on the belief that objects exist in a "unitary, atemporal way" prior to being temporarily made strange by the artist (ibid.: 71).[3]

These charges against estrangement are part of a larger critique of Shklovsky's Formalist school for what has been long seen as its championing of an autonomous art divorced from life, history, and politics. This critique was already well in place in the 1920s and ranged from serious studies by such major figures as Lev (Leon) Trotsky (1924) and Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1985 [1928]) to inflammatory denunciations in the press proclaiming that "more promising members [of the Formalist school] will have to undergo a thorough reeducation in the tough elementary school of marxism. . . . They will have to go to an ideological canossa. . . . We ought to send [them] to forced labor under good surveillance" (Gorbachev 1930; quoted in Erlich 1965 [1955]: 138).[4] At best, the more judicious of these critics recognized that, by the late 1920s, Formalism evolved toward

does not break its ties to its former political past; rather, it makes it better fit to expose the negative effects of the political term. In Brecht's work after 1935, estrangement (Verfremdung) works as a vaccine against alienation (Entfremdung) developed by using the elements of that alienation as antibodies.

3. For Jameson's account of Shklovsky's estrangement, see "The Formalist Projection" (in Jameson 1974), especially 50–75.

4. For a detailed account of the relationship between Marxist and Formalist critics, see "Marxism versus Formalism" in Erlich 1965 [1955]: 99–117.

a more politically aware sociological criticism.[5] Shklovsky, however, was seen as a retrograde exception and was accused of sticking to his own version of "canned formalism" (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1985 [1928]: 69). As the cornerstone of his literary theory, estrangement bore the brunt of this accusation. However, it is not clear whether it is estrangement that is ahistorical or the critics' account of it. Noting that Shklovsky's prolific work has been a set of variations on the theme of estrangement, most studies nevertheless neglect the differences among these variations or their development over time; instead, they narrowly focus on "Art as Device" ("Iskusstvo kak priem"), an article by Shklovsky published in 1917, when he was twenty. In this essay, I will argue that, in the decade following "Art as Device," Shklovsky's estrangement underwent profound transformations that were intricately bound with the major political events of his time—the revolution, the civil war, the ascendancy of the secret police, and the first major Soviet show trial, the 1922 trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs).

A number of critics have previously challenged the common charge against estrangement as a device of art for art's sake. Thus, Victor Erlich (1965 [1955]: 179) argued that, "as opposed to a pure art for art's sake doctrine, Shklovsky came to define poetry not in terms of what it is but in terms of what it is for"; he showed a "rather unexpected preoccupation with the uses of poetry and therapeutic value of creative deformation" on our routine-dulled perception of the world. Jurij Striedter (1989: 24) further expanded our understanding of estrangement by arguing that the first aspect of estrangement, "unmistakable in the passages from Tolstoy discussed by Shklovsky," was "ethical—and directed toward cognition of the world." Estrangement "corrects the reader's relationship to the world around him" by "impeding the kind of perception automatized by linguistic and social conventions, forcing the reader to see things anew" (ibid.: 23). Svetlana Boym's (1998: 243) study "Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shklovsky and Brodsky" further challenged the notion of estrangement as an apolitical artistic device by an analysis of estrangement "as a way of life" singularly fitted to the experience of exile and political dissent.

What has remained so far in the shadows is the dark side of estrangement, its entanglements with revolutionary and totalitarian politics. The present essay focuses on this Mr. Hyde of estrangement while also addressing its encounters with artistic and subversive estrangement. I trace the conflicted relationship between the politics and aesthetics of estrangement and its development through Shklovsky's oeuvre and beyond, in the work of lit-

5. As William Mills Todd III (1985: 16) showed, this recognition was the exception rather than the rule, and with few exceptions, the Western reception of Formalism has likewise focused upon the members' early activities.

erary critic Nicolae Steinhardt and of Joseph Brodsky and also in police interrogation and reeducation practices.

## Two Masters of Estrangement: Lev Tolstoy and Ivan the Terrible

Shklovsky coined the term *ostranenie* (estrangement) in his 1917 "Art as Device," a short essay that became the birth certificate of artistic estrangement. There he argued that our perception of the world was so dulled by routine that we do not fully see objects around us but merely recognize them. "If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic. If someone compared the sensation of holding a pen or speaking a foreign language for the first time, with the sensation of performing this same operation for the ten thousands time, he would agree with us" (Shklovsky 1990 [1925]: 5–6). In the striking language that characterized him, Shklovsky (ibid.: 5) went on to denounce this dulling effect of automatization on our perception of things and people: "Automatization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. . . . And so life is reckoned as nothing." Artistic estrangement was his antidote to this automatization. Shklovsky believed that the role of the writer was to jolt the readers out of their routine-dulled lives by making the familiar appear strange, offering different angles on life and thus restoring fresh perception. As Benjamin Sher (1990: xix) concisely put it, "*ostranenie* is a process or act that endows an object or image with 'strangeness'" by "removing it from the network of conventional, formulaic, and stereotypical perceptions and linguistic expressions." According to Shklovsky, artists use a variety of techniques to estrange their material. His favorite examples of such techniques are: calling attention to language and "complicating form," thus making "perception long and 'laborious'" instead of automatic (Shklovsky 1990 [1925]: 6); presenting familiar material from the point of view of an outsider, such as an animal, a child, or a foreigner; foregoing the conventional names for things and describing them as if seen for the first time. These estrangement techniques present objects in a new light and "intensify the sensation of things" (ibid.: 3). As a result, "the stone feels stony," one's wife more lovable, and war more terrifying (ibid.: 6).

Shklovsky's discussion of estrangement in "Art as Device" relies heavily on examples, many taken from the works of Lev Tolstoy. But while estrangement is an artistic device, its objects appear to be invariably political. Thus a horse's point of view estranged "the institution of private property" (ibid.: 14). Shklovsky also dwelled on Tolstoy's estrangement of flogging, a then common form of punishment that Tolstoy "made strange" by comparing it to unusual torture techniques. Shklovsky chose the following quote from

Tolstoy: "Just why this stupid, savage manner of inflicting pain and no other: such as pricking the shoulder or some other such part of the body with needles, squeezing someone's hands or feet in a vise, etc." (ibid.: 6). Besides torture, estrangement in Tolstoy similarly debunked conventional views on marriage, church rituals, bourgeois art, and war—all hot topics of political controversy in 1917. Indeed, the examples were so weighted toward political criticism that Shklovsky felt obliged to "apologize for the harshness of [his] examples" (ibid.) and warn that writers do not defamiliarize only those things they "sneered at" (ibid.: 17). However, despite this brief theoretical disclaimer, he went on amassing jarring, violent examples of an estrangement that he believed Tolstoy devised in order to "get to the conscience" (ibid.: 13). His only other prose examples of estrangement came from graphic erotic riddles; cited at the very end of the article, they read like a last gesture of épater les bourgeois after pricking their consciences.

In "The Structure of Fiction" (1920), published three years after "Art as Device," Shklovsky's (1990 [1925]: 61–62) explanation of artistic estrangement is brought even closer to the realm of politics: "In order to transform an object into a fact of art, it is necessary first to withdraw it from the domain of life. To do this, we must first and foremost 'shake up the object,' as Ivan the Terrible 'sorted out' his men. . . . An artist always incited insurrections among things. Things are always in a state of revolt with poets." Shklovsky chose the vocabulary of political turmoil—insurrections, revolt, and tyranny—in order to explain artistic estrangement: to *defamiliarize* and so clarify the more obscure phenomenon. Artists aspiring to estrangement were given the model of Ivan the Terrible in addition to that of Tolstoy.

## Revolutionary Estrangement and the Explosion of the Self

To understand Shklovsky's shift toward a more politicized description of estrangement, it is instructive to consider his *Sentimental Journey* (*Sentimental'noe puteshestvie* [1923]), a book of memoirs that covers the period from 1917, the year of both "Art as Device" and the October Revolution, to 1922. The 1917 article left us with the image of an iconoclastic youth, who used estrangement as his versatile weapon against stale literary criticism, bourgeois politics, and routine. Six years later, we find a radically different author and a radically different estrangement. Since in the wake of the revolution "there was no regular life of any kind" (Shklovsky 1970 [1923]: 134), the writer was no longer needed to estrange routine. The theorist of artistic estrangement was reduced to confessing: "I can't put together all the strange things [*vse to strannoe*] I have seen in Russia" (ibid.: 184). The helpless exclamation "it is strange" [*stranno*] punctuates the narrative. This "strange-

ness" has the same effect as artistic estrangement—it heightens perception. "The difference between revolutionary life and ordinary life," Shklovsky approvingly quotes from Boris Eikhenbaum, "is that now everything is felt"; the corollary is that "life became art" [*zhizn' stala iskusstvom*] (ibid.: 271). The revolution has turned life into art in the same way that the artist hitherto used to turn material into art—by making it strange and thus capable of intensifying sensation. This strangeness comes to define revolutionary Russia for Shklovsky (1923: 201), who concludes his contemporary collection of articles, *The Knight's Move* (*Khod konia*), thus: "What a strange country [*Kakaya strannaya strana*] . . . the country of electrification and Robinson Crusoes."

The narrator of *Sentimental Journey* is reduced to registering the effects of this revolutionary brand of estrangement on the ravaged landscape and on people. The prose is often limited to laconic narration:

> After the explosion, our soldiers, surrounded by enemies, were waiting for a train to come for them; while waiting, they busied themselves by picking up and putting together the shattered pieces of their comrades' bodies.
>
> They picked up pieces for a long time.
> Naturally, some of the pieces got mixed up.
> One officer went up to the long row of corpses.
> The last body had been put together out of the leftover pieces.
> It had the torso of a large man. Someone had added a small head; on the chest were small arms of different sizes, both left.
> The officer looked for a rather long time; then he sat on the ground and burst out laughing . . . laughing . . . laughing . . .
> In Tiflis—I am returning to my trip—a crime was committed.   (Shklovsky 1970 [1923]: 126)

In this scene, the terms of Shklovsky's 1920 description of estrangement are sinisterly literalized. "The object"—the human body—is shaken up to the point where it is permanently "withdrawn from the domain of life." The human body parts are thrown into a strikingly new configuration. While pathetically trying to restore the old order of things, the soldiers only top off the horror by assembling an incongruous human collage. The officer's laughter at the horror of the dismembered body is proof that the ultimate end of artistic estrangement, the alteration of habitual perception, has been outdone.

While observing the effects of revolutionary estrangement on other people, Shklovsky himself was hardly spared its effect. He too became literally pulverized, twisted, and disjointed by an explosion that he describes at length (ibid.: 216–19). His body not only looked unrecognizably strange; it was literally shot through with foreign bodies—little shrapnel fragments

that jutted out through his underwear for months after. *Sentimental Journey* is a blowup of this explosion scene. Throughout, Shklovsky uses explosions as his metaphors for the revolution. "I haven't seen the October Revolution [in Petersburg]; I haven't seen the explosion, if there was an explosion" (ibid.: 134). A couple of pages later, he rebukes his own doubts and reiterates the explosion metaphor: "If you don't believe that there was a revolution, go put your hand in [Russia's] wound. It's wide. The hole was pierced by a three-inch shell" (ibid.: 142). As a book of memoirs, *Sentimental Journey* registers the impact of the big explosion—the revolution and the civil war—not only on landscape and on people but, first and foremost, on the self.

The memoirs were finished during Shklovsky's 1922–23 exile in Berlin; they follow his hectic trajectory through various countries ravaged by war and revolution. The impetus for the last stage of Shklovsky's "sentimental journey" was provided by the Bolshevik secret police, the Cheka. Shklovsky fled Saint Petersburg, fearing that he would be arrested together with other prominent SRs: he had joined an underground organization plotting to restore the Constituent Assembly, recently dispersed by the Bolsheviks (Sheldon 1970: xiii).[6] In *Sentimental Journey*, Shklovsky repeatedly reminds us of his dramatic involvement with politics. Thus he proudly recounts the shock of a rival Marxist critic at seeing him in the midst of a street fight during the civil war. A far cry from the hackneyed portrait of the apolitical Formalist critic, Shklovsky is an armored car commander, then a wanted fugitive. We follow him as he is constantly hounded by the Cheka, narrowly escaping arrests by jumping off trains and hiding his identity under various fake passports. The disintegration of the self, experienced firsthand in the explosion, is developed into the leitmotif of the memoir: "Life flows in staccato pieces belonging to different systems. Only our clothing, not the body, joins together the disparate moments of life" (Shklovsky 1970 [1923]: 184). In the course of his travels, Shklovsky lost even that last shell of identity, his clothes. They got stolen, or he shed them for more or less successful disguises.

## Self-Estrangement and Self-Effacement

In his quest for survival, Shklovsky engaged in various experiments in self-presentation: he put on masks and forever devised camouflages. Sometimes, these experiments went awry. Although trying to make himself inconspicuous, he once ended up with violet dyed hair and an outfit that "begged for arrest:" "I was absurdly dressed. In a poncho, a sailor's shirt and a Red

6. See also Boym 1998: 244–45. For a history of the strained relationship between the SRs and the Bolsheviks, see Jansen 1982.

Army soldier's hat" (ibid.: 153). When he finally did get arrested, it was his literary talent that saved him: "They let me out. I am a professional raconteur" (ibid.: 141). This concoction of fake identities is a half-artistic, half-criminal endeavor. It appropriates the lesson of revolutionary estrangement—the self's fragmentation, strangeness, and plasticity—and turns it to one's own advantage. Shklovsky assumed the revolutionary estrangement of the self and moved beyond it toward a voluntary, controlled, and creative self-estrangement. In concocting this new kind of self-estrangement, Shklovsky used his literary talents for political purposes.

This hybrid self-estrangement secured his survival and offered mischievous pleasures. However, Shklovsky openly abandoned it in *Sentimental Journey*: "According to my [fake] passport, I was a technician. [The Cheka] questioned me about my specialty. . . . I held my own very convincingly. It's pleasant to lose oneself. To forget your name, slip out of your old habits. To think up some other man and consider yourself him. If it had not been for my writing desk, for my work, I would have never become Viktor Shklovsky again. I was writing a book, *Plot as a Manifestation of Style*" (ibid.: 151). The enforced self-fashioning of a runaway is often restricted to camouflage, and its closeness to self-effacement haunts the memoirs. Soon after he was released from the Cheka interrogation, Shklovsky inspected his fake passport only to be spooked by the discovery that the technician had been dead for a while. He ended the story by a firm return to his literary persona, presented here as the last haven of his endangered identity. However, this is hardly a happy ending to Shklovsky's experience of revolutionary estrangement. For despite this determination to become once again the critic Victor Shklovsky, there could hardly be a more dramatic difference between the iconoclastic critic of "Art as Device" and the narrator of *Sentimental Journey*. The former, the theorist and practitioner of estrangement, self-confidently put the whole world under iconoclastic question marks. The latter relinquished his right to comment upon the world in favor of self-presentation. He set the tone of his memoirs by declaring: "I don't want to be a critic of events: I only want to leave material for the critics. . . . I am making of myself a case study for posterity" (ibid.: 24). Rather than teaching us "How Don Quixote Is Made,"[7] *Sentimental Journey* confesses "How Viktor Shklovsky Is Made." The first admission is that Victor Shklovsky is not self-made:

> I've gone off a tangent, but everything that organizes the individual is external to him. He is only the point where lines of force intersect (188).
> The forces moving me were external to me.

7. "How Don Quixote Is Made" ("Kak sdelan 'Don Kikhot'") is the title of Shklovsky's famous Formalist reading of Cervantes' novel, included in Shklovsky 1990 [1925]: 72–101.

The forces moving others were external to them.

I am only a falling stone [*padaiushchii kamen'*].

A stone that falls and can, at the same time, light a lantern to observe its own course. (133)

In "Art as Device," "the stone made stony" was Shklovsky's memorable example of an estranged object. Here it is Shklovsky himself who has been turned into a stone; in other words, the theoretician of estrangement has become an object of estrangement. While this self/stone does not even have the freedom of a free fall, writing seems to preserve a last margin of freedom, that of recording a fall that the self has not caused and that it cannot stop or of going off on a tangent. The image of the stone that can light a lantern and record its own fall is painfully improbable. This strain is visible in another image of the effects of the revolution on Saint Petersburg's inhabitants, which fits well the author of *Sentimental Journey*: "a man whose insides have been torn out by an explosion, but he keeps on talking" (ibid.). As these images suggest, Shklovsky's autobiographical persona is singularly disconcerting in *Sentimental Journey*. This is not, as Marxist critics have commonly accused the Formalists, because he is hiding behind his devices and carefully constructed persona.[8] Even as he reveled in the ingenuity of his disguises, Shklovsky was actually divulging the well-kept secrets of his fake personas. In *Sentimental Journey*, he took his masks off, one by one, abandoned his fake passports, and signed with his own name. As much as it does a travelogue or a collection of impressions and bons mots, Shklovsky's memoirs recalls a trial deposition.

### Deposition and Autobiography: An Estranging Encounter

In his introduction to *Sentimental Journey*, Sidney Monas (1970: xxxvii) briefly suggested that "there is, in Shklovsky's statement about the war, something that suggests he is preparing a case before an imagined revolutionary tribunal, exculpating himself from the charges of chauvinism." Monas did not pursue the idea, deeming "the other 'case' he [Shklovsky] also prepares, the case study for posterity," "more interesting" (ibid.: xxxvii). I disagree. While the address to posterity is a commonplace of memoirs, the address to the Bolshevik tribunal singles out Shklovsky's brand of autobiographical writing. Shklovsky (1970 [1923]: 184–85) himself repeatedly proposed the trial

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8. One of the many contemporary examples of such accusations is Georgii Gorbachev's assessment of the darling of Formalist narrative studies, *skaz*: "The most important thing in the 'skaz' style is the possibility to hide one's authorial face from the public, to express some of one's authorial ideas, while not taking responsibility for them personally" (quoted in Eikhenbaum 1927: 288).

as a motivation for writing the book: "And all this [writing] because I cannot forget about the trial, the trial that begins in Moscow tomorrow. . . . And at this moment, with my life in fragments, I stand before the ordered consciousness of the communists." He refers here to the infamous trial of the SRs that took place in the summer of 1922, at the time when he was writing *Sentimental Journey* in Berlin. The trial was a major Soviet as well as an international media spectacle, "the reigning model of the Soviet show trial throughout the 1920s" (Cassiday 2000: 113). The ten men and two women who stood trial received death sentences, which were then commuted to life imprisonment under the pressure of the international socialist movement (ibid.: 44). Shklovsky understandably treats their trial as his own. The pamphlet that denounced the SRs implicated Shklovsky, and this prompted him to flee abroad, barely escaping the tribunal's draconic judgment (Monas 1970: xxix).

In the historical context of Shklovsky's writings, a trial deposition is not a surprising model for autobiographical writing. Indeed, a Soviet observer of the Shakhty affair, another famous trial of the 1920s closely modeled on the SR trial, noted the prevalence of the autobiography in the depositions: "The following routine has been worked out. Each of the accused . . . starts his testimony with an autobiographical sketch" (quoted in Cassiday 2000: 115).[9] As I have attempted to show elsewhere (Vatulescu 2004), Soviet interrogations and trial depositions were set apart by the adoption of an (auto)biographical model. Whereas classical criminal records are usually limited to the investigation of one crime, the Soviet personal file was concerned with the extensive biography of the suspect. Already in 1918, Martin Latsis, a leading Chekist, instructed investigators: "Do not look in the materials you have gathered for evidence that a suspect acted or spoke against the Soviet authorities. The first question you should ask him is what class he belongs to, what is his origin, education, profession. These questions should determine his fate. This is the essence of the Red Terror" (quoted in Tolczyk 1999: 19). This speech documents the shift from the traditional police file, concerned with the particular crime, to the Soviet secret police file, concerned with the whole biography of the accused. So autobiography became the standard starting point of any secret police interrogation, like the ones that Shklovsky (1970 [1923]: 151) described being subjected to: "Sometimes I was summoned to the local Cheka, which checked all newcomers practi-

9. Indeed, in the 1920s, autobiography emerged as a privileged genre of the new Soviet regime. Thus many communications between the citizen and the state, whether denunciations, letters to the editor, or party membership applications, were routinely prefaced by the autobiography of the writer. For a thorough account of autobiography in party membership applications, see Halfin 2003.

cally every day. They would question me item by item: who are you, what did you do before the war, during the war, between February and October, and so on." [10]

The use of autobiography as defense in a trial is not new. Indeed, it goes back to Rousseau's (1968 [1782]: 43) self-conscious inauguration of the genre on the first page of *Les confessions*: "Let the trumpet of the Last Judgment sound when it pleases; I will come, this book in hand, and present myself in front of the sovereign judge." If Rousseau wrote his autobiography for God's last judgment, many Soviet citizens wrote their autobiographies for the investigator's judgment. Giving an account of oneself in these peculiar conditions and for this peculiar audience certainly molded that account. In regard to the "problem of confession for cases being investigated for trial . . . the role of the other in formulating discourse" is, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1981: 350) tersely noticed in the 1930s, constitutive of the resulting texts. This jarring intrusion of the deposition into autobiography recalls the little shrapnel fragments that jut out of Shklovsky's underwear, continuously reminding him of his own, literal estrangement. Louis Althusser's model of interpellation seems particularly apt in describing these forced autobiographies. [11] These texts were certainly not simply expressing a subject that was always already there but were interpellating one into existence. [12] However, while interrogated suspects were not free to express who they were but were shaped by the interpellation, they certainly had some flexibility in manipulating their image. Shklovsky's fake names and autobiographies, composed in answer to the investigator's questions, offer a concrete example.

Shklovsky used his art to concoct his actual depositions and the model of the deposition when he wrote his memoirs. This mixture of genres is certainly troubling and questions any clear-cut separation between aesthetics and politics as well as between subversion and surrender. It is a testimony to the power and fascination that the new Soviet genres exerted on Shklovsky that, even after he had been freed from the interrogation, he chose the deposition as a model for his memoirs. At the same time, practicing this genre outside of its confining context allowed the writer to take certain

10. In "Investigative Methods of the Secret Police," A. Grigoriev (1957: 229) asserts that "in its 'classic' form an interrogation begins by having the prisoner fill out a detailed questionnaire and write his autobiography and a list of his acquaintances."
11. Althusser's (1972: 174) illustration of interpellation is the policeman's address to the passerby: "'Hey, you there!' . . . the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*."
12. I am here in full agreement with Eric Naiman's (2001) assessment of Igal Halfin's and Jochen Hellbeck's fascinating work on Soviet subjectivity. In their programmatic attempt to read the Soviet text rather than read between the lines, these scholars sometimes take that text at face value, ignoring the subjects' possible distancing and manipulations of the text.

freedoms—irony, paradoxes, and double entendre—that undermine this genre from within. Also, as Julie Cassiday reminds us, trial depositions in the 1920s differed from the fully scripted self-denigrating confessions made infamous by the 1930s Stalinist show trials.[13] Significantly, the defendants in the 1922 SR trial did not confess to their alleged crimes; instead, they "used the trial as a platform for condemning Soviet excesses and preaching their own brand of socialism" (Cassiday 2000: 47). Therefore, Shklovsky's appropriation of the genre of trial deposition is far from a univocal gesture of surrender.

This estranging presence of official Soviet genres in the intimate genre of autobiography is first visible in *Sentimental Journey* but is not limited to it. Both of Shklovsky's next two autobiographical texts, *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love* (*Zoo, ili pis'ma ne o liubvi*) (1923) and *Third Factory* (*Tret'ia fabrika*) (1926), are defined by a particular blend of incongruous mixtures between the private and the public, the literary and the political. At first sight *Zoo*, written and published in Berlin, appears to have rid itself of the sinister shadow of the state-appointed reader. It starts as a collage of intimate letters to and from Elsa Triolet, an émigré with whom the narrator was in love during his exile. The text's surprise comes at the very end: the narrator abruptly shifts from addressing his lover to addressing the All Russian Central Executive Committee, begging for permission to return to Russia (Shklovsky 1971 [1923]: 103–4). Shklovsky's epistolary style does not change significantly: it remains wry, outspoken, and intimate as he pours his heart out to his new readers, confessing the pain of exile and the secrets of his love affair. His strangely intimate letters to the government deny both the basic distance from oneself that is common in an official self-presentation and the common distance from the establishment itself. As such, they take the paradoxical form of raw confessions outreaching the blanks of a government form.

If *Zoo* started as a collection of love letters and ended as a letter to the establishment, *Third Factory* started as a capitulation to the establishment written after Shklovsky's return to the Soviet Union and ended up as an unwelcome subversion.

> After *Zoo*, I wrote *Third Factory*, a book completely incomprehensible to me. In that book I wanted to capitulate to the time—not only capitulate, but take my troops to the other side. I wanted to come to terms with the present. As it turned out, however, I had no say in the matter. But the material on the village and the

13. While the scenario of these later trials was established in the 1930s in Moscow, its influence spread throughout the Soviet bloc for decades after. For a fascinating study of the poetics of these later show trials, see Steiner 2000.

material on my own disordered state in life, included in the book, got out of hand and acquired a shape contrary to my original plan, so the book was resented. On the whole, however, books are not written to please; in fact, sometimes books are not written: they emerge, they happen. I write this not to vindicate myself but to present a fact.    (Quoted in Sheldon 1977: xi)

Here, Shklovsky attributes the main contradiction between his autobiography's intent and its final result to the opposing pulls of two external forces — "the times" and the literary process by which books emerge. Richard Sheldon (ibid.: x) has identified contradiction as the subversive hallmark of Shklovsky's style. But if we follow Shklovsky's own account, his contradictions are less willful subversions than traces of contradictory external forces that the self registers. This determinism could itself be taken for a declaration of surrender. But again, a closer look at the historical context denies such easy verdicts. Igal Halfin (2003: 236) showed that the battle between the determinist and the voluntarist view defined the Soviet discourse on the self in the 1920s and early 1930s. In the early twenties, the behaviorist-deterministic view held that "man might have known the forces operating within him, but he could do little by way of controlling them" (ibid.: 162). This view, so close in its formulation to Shklovsky's description of the self as a "point where lines of force intersect," was replaced in the late twenties by a voluntarist doctrine whereby "man was being called out to become his own master, a subject of history and not its object" (ibid.: 180). The early 1930s took this belief in the plasticity of human nature to an extreme, as "Soviet men and women were expected to reforge themselves" (ibid.: 231). As the establishment forcefully moved toward a voluntarist view of the self, declaring determinism to be an attack on the idea of revolution and its new man, Shklovsky's view became all the more deterministic. In *Sentimental Journey*, he expressed his distrust of the Bolshevik reforging of the new man:

The Bolsheviks believe in miracles.
    They even perform miracles, but miracles are performed poorly.
    You remember the folk tale about the devil who could reforge [*perekovyval*] an old man into a young one? First he consumes the man in fire; then he restores him to life rejuvenated.
    Then the devil's apprentice tries to perform the miracle. He's able to consume the man in fire, but he can't rejuvenate him.    (Shklovsky 1970 [1923]: 141)

Shklovsky's criticism of the holy of holies of Soviet utopia — the reeducation or reforging of the new human [*perekovka*] — added insult to injury by describing the communist project in the language of religious parable. However, the view of the self that challenged Soviet orthodoxy also questions the possibility of agency and thus of subversion.

*Third Factory* took this deterministic view to an extreme as Shklovsky (1977 [1926]: 22) started speaking in the "voice of a half-processed commodity" [*golos polufabrikata*]. He divided his life into three periods, united through the leitmotif of the factories that have processed him: "The first factory was my family and school. The second was *Opoyaz* [the Formalist research group to which Shklovsky belonged]. And the third [the film factory where he was currently working] is processing me at the very moment" (ibid.: 8). In Shklovsky's self-portrait as a commodity, the terms of Marxist alienation have been self-consciously revisited. If Marxism deplores the alienation of the worker from the commodified object of his or her labor, Shklovsky shows that in the Soviet Union this gap is bridged by turning the individual into an alienated commodity. At the end of his critique of "The Fetishism of Commodities," Marx (1967 [1867]: 83) imagined the commodities obnoxiously boasting about their "natural" exchange value. Shklovsky's commodity, or Shklovsky as commodity, speaks of his own alienation, of just how unnatural he feels. This distressing image of the self as a commodity is the culmination of a long process of the self's estrangement. While revolutionary estrangement dramatically exploded the self, this everyday estrangement "deformed the material" in quieter if relentless fashion.

Shklovsky's theoretical and autobiographical work throws some rare light on these "certain kinds of estrangement." But he rarely offers solutions, except briefly in the *Sentimental Journey* account of his interrogations. His response there is self-estrangement—the half-criminal, half-artistic concoction of fake identities and biographies that secured his survival. Although openly abandoned when the undercover fugitive decided to reassume the identity of the literary critic Victor Shklovsky, this self-estrangement later developed into a powerful art of survival, in the work of Nicolae Steinhardt and Joseph Brodsky.

## "This Is Surrealism": Estrangement in the Interrogation Room

For a Romanian, Nicolae Steinhardt's name is associated with a legendary generation of intellectuals who shaped the Romanian cultural scene between the two world wars, such as Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Eugen Ionescu, Constantin Noica, Petre Țuțea, and Dinu Pillat. These figures are credited with an unprecedented effervescence of intellectual life and discredited by extremist right-wing leanings. Some of them chose to emigrate—they are the ones whose names are easily recognizable; others stayed behind, writing for the drawer or for a close group of friends. In 1960, over twenty of the latter were condemned to prison terms that ranged from six to twenty-five years, largely for reading and disseminating the books of their

émigré friends (Tănase 2003 [1997]: 371–72).[14] One of the defendants in this show trial of intellectuals, Steinhardt was condemned to twelve years of forced labor.[15]

Steinhardt's prison experience became the subject of his main work, *Happiness Journal* (*Jurnalul fericirii*), an extraordinary memoir written in experimental prose. The book was a cause célèbre decades before it was published. Steinhardt's voluminous secret police files tell this story in characteristic detail.[16] In 1972, as Steinhardt was composing his manuscript, the secret police placed him under continuous surveillance. Having bugged his apartment, they noted every gesture, from breakfast to dinner; but for long periods of the time, the transcriber was reduced to noting: "the scratch of a pen on paper." Soon intrigued by this writing, a couple of agents broke into Steinhardt's apartment, took a look at the *Happiness Journal* manuscript, and photographed it for the reading pleasure of their superiors. Having convinced themselves of its subversive intent, the police fabricated an anonymous denunciation accusing Steinhardt of homosexuality and of possession of foreign currency and used it as a justification for searching his apartment.[17] During the search, conducted on December 14, 1972, they found the manuscript "as if by chance" and confiscated it. Under pressure from the Writers' Union, the manuscript was returned in 1975, only to be confiscated again in 1984. In the late 1980s, Radio Free Europe broadcasted

14. The legal indictment was "plotting against the social order" (*uneltire împotriva ordinii sociale*). One of the defendants asked at the end of the trial "what fighting against the social order meant. The president of the tribunal answered: 'It could mean a gesture, a smile'" (Tănase 2003 [1997]: 367). Tănase's *Anatomia mistificării* (*The Anatomy of Mystification*) is an excellent source for the study of this case, bringing together investigation and trial documents as well as letters, memoirs, and interviews with survivors.

15. Like most other surviving political prisoners in Romania, Steinhardt was, in fact, amnestied in 1964.

16. This account is based on my reading of Steinhardt's secret police files, *I 207, Dosar de urmărire informativă nr. 49342*, 4–11, and *P 336, Dosar penal nr. 118988*, 3, which are now found in the Arhiva Consiliului Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității (Archive of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives) (see ACNSAS n.d. a and b).

17. The denunciation is found in ACNSAS n.d. a: 4:276. The admission that this denunciation was fabricated by the secret police appears in ibid. 5:85. During the first week of Steinhardt's interrogation in January 1960, the secret police had already managed to pressure him into admitting to having been charged with homosexuality in 1949: "Proces verbal de interogator, 8.01.1960" (ACNSAS n.d. b: 3:292). The secret police commonly blackmailed homosexuals and threatened them with exposure through public trials. Charges of homosexuality previously initiated the legal action against one of Steinhardt's co-defendants, Mihai Rădulescu. After the trial that condemned him to prison for homosexuality, Rădulescu was taken directly to the secret police headquarters, where he was charged with participating in the same subversive group as Steinhardt. Rădulescu died during this arrest after being severely tortured. It is still unclear whether he died as the immediate result of this abuse or whether he committed suicide (Tănase 2003 [1997]: 281–82).

fragments from *Happiness Journal*, which people listened to despite the government's interdiction and despite the static, which always seemed to grow thicker when you most wanted to hear. Steinhardt died soon thereafter, in March 1989, a few months before the revolution that made the publication of his book finally possible. In 1991, just as I was starting to forget the feeling of waiting in line for hours in the hope of getting some elusive food item, such as bread, milk, or bananas, I gleefully positioned myself in a line winding around my hometown's main bookstore. It was the first time that I saw people queing in a festive mood: *Happiness Journal* was on sale.

Steinhardt's book starts with a seemingly banal conversation between unnamed speakers. It will soon turn out that this conversation is Steinhardt's interrogation and that one of the speakers is a close friend turned collaborator of the secret police. But the first page keeps all this information from us readers: the interrogation room and the arrest are not named, so that we are abruptly thrown into a disorienting text. Our confusion is, in fact, carefully staged to mirror that of the narrator, who finds himself in an "unreal and subtle décor, carefully concocted":

> I am looking at her [the friend turned collaborator]—it is she, but as if in a dream, she does unexpected things, she speaks *differently*; and synchronous with her, the world is also *different*, it is surrealist. See, *this* is surrealism: objects, the same objects, have a different order, a different finality. *So this is also possible*. Now, yes, the teapot is also a woman, the stove is an elephant. . . . Max Ernst, Dali, Duchamp. . . . But also Munch's *Scream*, I want to scream, to wake up from the nightmare, to come back to our old earth, good and gentle, where, obedient, things are what we know they are and answer the meanings that we always gave them. . . . I would like to get out of this unsettling town by Delvaux, from this Tanguy field, with severed members, soft and rejoined according to bizarre affinities, through *different* couplings than those we are accustomed to. *Home*, on earth. . . . This cannot be the earth. This is not she.   (Steinhardt 1997 [1990]: 12; emphasis in the original)[18]

Steinhardt's striking exclamation regarding the interrogation room—"*this* is surrealism"—might come as a surprise for readers of John Bender's classic account of the origins of the modern confinement, *Imagining the Penitentiary* (1987). Bender's thorough assessment of the emergence of this modern institution in the eighteenth century could be summarized thus: this is realism. Indeed, Bender shows how the modern European prison was built on the premises of the realist novel and in particular on the realist belief in the changing nature of human character. Thus the realist interest in the influence of the environment on the development of the indi-

18. All translations from Romanian into English are mine.

vidual was translated into the modern prison's emphasis on psychology and the reformation of the individual in the carefully designed environment of the prison. Bender believes that, like the realist novel, which tried to hide its fictional devices and pass for unmediated reality, the emerging modern prison tried to gain legitimacy by passing itself off for the natural order of things.[19] Bender endeavors to oppose this naturalizing and essentializing claim of the modern penitentiary by historicizing its creation and revealing its roots in literary realism. And indeed, it takes all the insight of Bender's analysis to bare these fictional roots: he repeatedly undermines well-rooted commonplaces and painstakingly develops an intricate argument. In contrast, Steinhardt's exclamation "this is surrealism" was instantaneous, as his penitentiary's fictional devices were histrionically flaunted. The difference could not be starker: while the realist aesthetic of the early modern penitentiary aimed to naturalize, the surrealist aesthetic of Steinhardt's post–World War II interrogation room aimed to estrange.

Indeed, Steinhardt's conflation of the interrogation room with surrealism ("*this* is surrealism") recalls Shklovsky's observation that during the revolution life became art. An erudite literary critic, Steinhardt chooses a particular, surrealist art to stand for the interrogation room. For Steinhardt, this interrogation room surrealism is defined first of all by its difference from the familiar, everyday world, an opposition that he insistently emphasizes through both repetition and italics. This interrogation room surrealism is further based on a divorce between "things" and the "meanings we always gave them." Roman Jakobson argued that "to point out that the sign is not identical with the referent" is the very basis of estrangement, since otherwise "the object becomes automatized and the perception of reality withers away" (quoted in Erlich 1965 [1955]: 181). According to Victor Erlich (ibid.: 179–80), even though the French surrealists were not aware of Shklovsky's work, and neither was he aware of theirs, their particular understanding of artistic estrangement was "strikingly similar" to Shklovsky's, to the point of a "virtual identity of formulation." And indeed, what qualifies the interrogation room as surreal for Steinhardt is precisely its ability to present the world in a radically different light and alter normal perception or, in Shklovsky's lingo, to estrange. Steinhardt's description of the interrogation room indirectly meets Shklovsky's estrangement through the French surrealist connection.

19. It was Roland Barthes, of course, who famously unmasked realism's attempt to hide its devices and pass for unmediated reality. Bender traced his understanding of realism to Barthes's definition: "Not only do signifier and signified seem to unite, but in this confusion, the signifier seems to be erased or to become transparent so as to let the concept present itself just as if it were referring to nothing but its own presence" (quoted in Bender 1987: 210).

Like Shklovsky, Steinhardt soon realizes that there are also crucial differences between artistic, in this case surrealist, and secret police estrangement. The reader's temporary excursion through literature estranges by offering different angles upon the world, so that, upon return, one finds the stone stonier and one's wife more lovable. Secret police estrangement offers a one-way ride to a radically different world, with no return ticket. Steinhardt has no way out of the surrealist decor of the interrogation room: the world of everyday reality has become as inaccessible to him as that of an escapist fiction. Steinhardt (1997 [1990]: 13) soon realizes that he resembles less a reader of surrealist literature, who can at will access and exit his surrealist text simply by opening and closing a book, than a character in a totalitarian fiction experimenting with nothing but the death of its characters: "Now everything is the same to me, everything is gray and the same. I step into the world of the nouveau roman and of a literature without characters . . . where the SELF disappears confused in an undifferentiated crowd. Personality (what's that?) is fragmented, passed through the sieve to the last smidgen. No matter what I do, I'm lost. You're lost, you're lost" (emphasis in the original). This initial reading of the interrogation room, as surrealism, revolved around one key word, italicized by Steinhardt—"*different*." In his revised reading, the key term is "same" or "undifferentiated." This complete reversal gets to the very core of the distinction between artistic and interrogation room estrangement. Both divorce things from the meanings we usually give them and insert them in "a different order." But unlike a surrealist text, "the different order" of the interrogation room is soon revealed to forcefully bar its captive's access to any other order of things. It thus annuls the very possibility of difference, which crumbles into oppressive, undifferentiated sameness. The teapot is not like a woman, "the teapot is a woman." The face of his friend is not like the face of a collaborator, it is the face of a collaborator.

Nor is it just familiar objects like a teapot or the stove that, severed from their usual associations with the home, "have a different finality" in the interrogation room (ibid.: 12). It it first and foremost the self who has been violently severed from the world as he knows it and inserted in "this different order," where the central elements of his identity, "jew, intellectual, cityman" (ibid.: 17), take on a whole new meaning—"criminal." The defining twist of interrogation room estrangement is that its object par excellence is the self. As we have seen, this was also true of the revolutionary estrangement described by Shklovsky in *Sentimental Journey*; in that text, the culmination of revolutionary estrangement was his own and the other soldiers' explosion and then the incongruous collage of body parts on an anonymous battlefield. Steinhardt's description of the "Tanguy field, with severed

members, soft and rejoined according to bizarre affinities, through different couplings than those we are accustomed to," expresses this radical estrangement of the human body in uncannily similar terms.

There are also significant differences. In Shklovsky's description, estrangement is a side effect of revolutionary/civil war violence; Steinhardt's estrangement is carefully orchestrated by his interrogators. This is no accidental explosion but rather a prolonged process of breaking the suspect, which combines a carefully designed regimen of physical torture and psychological abuse. Steinhardt believes that the estranging surrealist decor is deliberately designed by his interrogators: "Oh, you [the interrogators] wish that I would let myself be wrapped up in the magic of semi-dreaming, in the dizzying smoke of a surrealist scenography" (ibid.: 15). For Steinhardt, the investigators' performance is certainly no art for art's sake; instead, it has a clear purpose: "everything in this unreal and subtle décor, carefully concocted, pushes me to take refuge in confusion and get lost/lose myself [*sa mă pierd*] in the haze" (ibid.: 12). The common meaning of the Romanian "mă pierd" is "I am getting lost" as well as "I am losing my cool"; its literal meaning, however, is "I lose myself." Steinhardt (ibid.: 13) plays on this ambiguity to show how the carefully manipulated feeling of spatial disorientation leads to psychological confusion and finally to the confession that amounts to self-destruction: "I am getting lost [mă pierd] in the smoke of confusion. . . . I let myself pray to the sweet delirium of evanescence, and then *I confess*, I confess. . . . No matter what I do, I'm lost" (emphasis in the original).

Steinhardt's reading of the interrogation room as an artfully estranged surrealist decor designed to sever his ties to the outside world, produce confusion, and finally elicit confession is hardly a literary critic's far-fetched interpretation of his prison experience; nor is its validity limited to Eastern Europe. The *Kubark Counterintelligence Interrogation* was written in 1963 and functioned as the leading Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) manual on interrogation until 1983, when it was revised and retitled *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual*.[20] The *Kubark* offers investigators a catalog of interrogation principles and techniques; it also proposes a general course of action that can then be adapted to the particular profile of each suspect.

According to the *Kubark*, the first goal of interrogation is to cut the sus-

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20. The *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual* was largely based on its predecessor. Many changes are written in by hand over still-legible deleted phrases. The changes are mostly directed against the use of radical coercive techniques, such as severe physical torture and narcosis. Both manuals were declassified in 1997 in response to a Freedom of Information Act request filed by the *Baltimore Sun* in 1994. (*Kubark* is a CIA code name for itself.)

pect's ties to the outside world. Besides arrest and incarceration, the *Kubark* suggests additional techniques to enhance the feeling of isolation. Thus, upon arrest, the clothes of the suspect should immediately be taken away and replaced with new, preferably ill-fitting ones. "The point [of this] is that man's sense of identity depends upon a continuity in surroundings, habits, appearance, actions, relations with others, etc. Detention permits the interrogator to cut through these links and throw the interrogatee back upon his own unaided internal resources" (Central Intelligence Agency 1997a [1963]: 86). The *Kubark* recommends that this feeling of isolation be cultivated throughout the interrogation: "There should not be a telephone in the [interrogation] room. . . . it is a visible link to the outside; its presence makes a subject feel less cut off, better able to resist" (ibid.: 46). The *Kubark* notes that the feeling of isolation can be exacerbated through carefully designed solitary confinement and "deprivation of sensory stimuli" to lead progressively to anxiety, unbearable stress, confusion, "delusions, hallucinations, and other pathological effects" (ibid.: 89).

These techniques are designed "to enhance within the subject his feelings of being cut off from the known and the reassuring, and of being *plunged into the strange*" (ibid.: 86; my emphasis). The *Kubark* insists that the interrogator should not just "make the subject's world [i.e., the interrogation environment] unlike the world to which he has been accustomed but also *strange in itself*" (ibid.; my emphasis). It goes on to warn that "little is gained by replacing one routine [the free man's] with another [the prisoner's]." What should define the new world of the interrogation are "constant disruptions of patterns," a constant undermining of all "familiarity" and "routine" (ibid.: 87). The description of a key technique designed "to plunge the subject into the strange" merits full quotation:

> The aim of the Alice in Wonderland or confusion technique is to confound the expectations and conditioned reactions of the interrogatee. He is accustomed to a world that makes some sense, at least to him: a world of continuity and logic, a predictable world. He clings to this world to reinforce his identity and powers of resistance.
>
> The confusion technique is designed not only to *obliterate the familiar* but to replace it with *the weird*. . . . Pitch, tone, and volume of the interrogators' voices are unrelated to the import of the questions. . . . In this *strange atmosphere* the subject finds that the pattern of speech and thought which he had learned to consider *normal* have been replaced by an *eerie* meaninglessness.    (Ibid.: 76; my emphasis)

Subjected to this technique, the suspect may well feel, like Steinhardt, that he or she was plunged in the midst of a strange text. The name, "Alice in

Wonderland," shows that this is a carefully staged impression; it also provides specificity and accuracy concerning the position of the interrogatee. Alice's fall into the underworld lands her at the center of an absurd interrogation and trial. Unlike a reader of surrealist literature, Alice has little control over her sojourn in Wonderland: she cannot enter or exit at will. But "Alice in Wonderland" was only one of the interrogation techniques aimed at "obliterating the familiar" and creating a "strange atmosphere." A number of techniques to be used for this end are neatly summarized by the successor manual: persistent manipulation of time, the use of retarding and advancing clocks, serving meals at odd times, disrupting sleep schedules, and disorientation regarding day and night (Central Intelligence Agency 1997b [1983]: L-17).

As such, estrangement, or the deliberate and crafted replacement of the "familiar" with the "strange," appears as a key interrogation device:

> The effectiveness of most of the non-coercive techniques depends upon their unsettling effect. The interrogation situation is in itself disturbing to most people encountering it for the first time. The aim is to enhance this effect, to disrupt radically the familiar emotional and psychological associations of the subject. When this aim is achieved, resistance is seriously impaired. There is an interval—which may be extremely brief—of suspended animation, a kind of psychological shock or paralysis. It is caused by a traumatic or sub-traumatic experience which explodes, as it were, the world that is familiar to the subject as well as his image of himself within that world. Experienced interrogators recognize this effect when it appears and know that at this moment the source is far more open to suggestion, far likelier to comply than he was just before he experienced the shock.    (Central Intelligence Agency 1997a [1963]: 66)

This explosion is the climactic moment that the whole manual has worked toward. When it finally reaches that moment, its usually composed, didactic language is itself unsettled. Unable to find the exact word, the author resorts to approximations, "a kind of psychological shock or paralysis," and figurative language, "explodes, as it were." Capturing the climactic moment of exploding the subject's familiar world and "image of himself" tests the limits of the *Kubark*'s rhetoric; taking up the challenge, the manual repeatedly revisits this moment, unpacking the process of "breaking the suspect" (ibid.: 31) so dramatically compressed in the explosion metaphor. Thus we learn that "the capacity for resistance is diminished by the disorientation" and confusion caused by severing the links of the suspect with his or her environment and plunging him or her in a strange environment (ibid.: 50). As a result, the subject enters a state of "suggestibility" (ibid.: 85) and even "loss of autonomy" (ibid.: 40), when he or she is likely to comply with the

demands made by the interrogator. All of this, the *Kubark* explains, can be achieved through the "non-coercive techniques" summarized earlier. "Non-coercive interrogation is not conducted without pressure. On the contrary, the goal is to generate maximum pressure inside the interrogatee. His resistance is sapped, his urge to yield is fortified, until in the end he defeats himself" (ibid.: 52). Steinhardt's account of his interrogation uncannily traces the key points of this interrogation scenario, leading from physical to psychological disorientation and all the way to defeating oneself. Compressing this trajectory, his obsessive "mă pierd" (I am getting lost, I lose my cool, I lose myself) comes as close as words can get to capturing the moment when the subject's world and "his image of himself within that world are exploded" (ibid.: 66).

As the *Kubark* notes, its interrogation techniques were often shared by Soviet interrogators (ibid.: 75). Contemporary CIA and Department of Defense studies on Soviet investigation techniques similarly detail the same basic steps of the interrogation scenario: isolating the suspects from the outside world (Hinkle and Wolff 1956: 125–30) and creating disorientation and confusion so as to sap resistance and prompt confession (Hilden 2001 [1958]: 61–62).[21] Victims of Soviet interrogations often give the most vivid picture of the interrogation techniques of the GPU and their effects on the suspect. In his memoirs, *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, Aleksander Wat (1981 [1977]: 38–39) left us a striking description of the estranging effects of isolation techniques used in the GPU headquarters at Lubyanka in 1940: "The rule here was strict and permanent closure, a cutting off of ties with the outer world, the world of authentic reality and logic, in order to drive the prisoner, by the devastation of his mind and moral degradation, into a universe which was not an imaginary one, as people usually suppose, but fundamentally different, governed by laws unintelligible to the prisoner" (quoted in Venclova 1996: 142). In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (2002 [1973]: 46) describes interrogation methods aimed at inducing "extreme confusion" that closely recall the

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21. The most thorough of these studies is Hinkle and Wolff 1956, written by two men who "played central roles in setting up the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology, perhaps the most important academic cover organization for the mind-control programs of the CIA. . . . Wolff was president of the New York Neurological Association; later on he became president of the American Neurological Association. Hinkle was a professor at Cornell University" (Rev 2002: 86–87). These studies point out that the Soviet "doctrine was developed and organized by the police officials themselves" (Hilden 2001 [1958]: 59) and "developed through trial and error" (Hinkle and Wolff 1956: 150), in contrast to American investigation manuals, like the *Kubark*, which rely heavily on psychological research (Central Intelligence Agency 1997a [1963]: 2).

"Alice in Wonderland or confusion technique." Thus "the psychological contrast" method was based on sudden reversals of the interrogator's tone and was often reinforced by "sound effects," "light effects," and imposed sleeplessness with the intent to "befog the reason, undermine the will," so that the "prisoner ceases to be himself, to be his own 'I'" (ibid.: 51). In response to this interrogation room estrangement of the self, Solzhenitsyn (ibid.: 63–64) advises prisoners to take leave of life as they step into the interrogation room: "At the very threshold, you must say to yourself: 'My life is over, a little early to be sure, but there's nothing to be done about it. . . . For me those I love have died, and for them I have died. From today on, *my body* is useless and *alien to me*. . . .' Confronted with such a prisoner, the interrogator will tremble. Only the man who has renounced everything can win that victory. But how can one turn one's body to stone?" (my emphasis). The willful self-estrangement that aims to turn the body into stone is a direct response to the realization of the extreme vulnerability of the body. Solzhenitsyn's account of the interrogation is famous for compiling an appallingly comprehensive list of the physical and psychological tortures used during Soviet investigations. Having followed his own trajectory from a violent, traumatic estrangement of the self to defensive self-estrangement, Solzhenitsyn meets Shklovsky at the finish line. Their stories end with the same peculiar metaphor for the estranged self: the body turned to stone.

### Eulogy to the Lie: Self-estrangement and Reeducation

Steinhardt (1997 [1990]: 6) refers to this paragraph from Solzhenitsyn in the preface to *Happiness Journal*, calling it one of the few viable responses to secret police interrogations. However, the account of his interrogation that opens the actual text of *Happiness Journal* is defined by a feverish search for his own personal solution. The interrogation revolved around a seemingly innocuous question: whether during a dinner party Steinhardt had broken a glass. At first, Steinhardt cannot answer the question, simply because he does not remember the facts. So the interrogator obligingly offers a solution: admit to breaking it, don't even bother to recall the actual events. As the stakes seem low and the pressure to answer the question is enormous, it becomes tempting to acquiesce. However, as Steinhardt (ibid.: 13) soon realizes, once he gives up the effort to remember, "makes the psychological gesture of relaxing" and giving in to the interrogator, he is well on his road to indiscriminate confession, and then he is "lost."

Through an effort of memory and lucidity, he establishes that he had

indeed broken the glass and considers telling the truth and, he immediately adds, the objective truth: "If I acknowledge that I broke it, I tell the truth, (the *objective* truth) and once I've told the truth, I have to go ahead and acknowledge that Nego has spoken against the regime. (This is the whole goal of this nocturnal meeting.)" (ibid.: 12–13; emphasis in the original). The addition in parentheses, "the objective truth," marks the very moment when telling the objective truth becomes questionable for Steinhardt. For from now on, truth can be categorized, it has different types, kinds, and degrees, and the possibility of telling a truth other than the objective one insinuates itself.

For Steinhardt, telling the objective truth was the most basic moral law of the world outside. In the light of the interrogation room, however, this objective truth is redefined as factual truth — which appeared to be not only narrow and simplistic but also ethically compromised. For the interrogators wanted nothing but this factual truth, Steinhardt's exact memories of the dinner party. The friend turned collaborator was not telling lies but repeating the objective truth "with the precision of computer memory" (ibid.: 12). The problem is that, once the interrogator entered the scene, this truth became the object of extrapolation that deeply politicized it and turned it into a proof of guilt. Steinhardt described a typical exchange between a suspect and the investigator: "'Have you been in Gheorghe Florian's house?' 'Yes.' But instead of this innocuous answer, the investigator writes down: 'Yes, I admit that I have been in the conspiratorial house on street . . . , number . . . where I had criminal exchanges with the fascist Gheorghe Florian'" (ibid.: 169). Similarly, Steinhardt's objectively true answer — yes, he had broken a glass — would amount in the investigator's tendentious logic to an incriminating proof against his friend Nego: the broken glass would be taken as proof that the atmosphere during the dinner was tense because Nego had spoken against the regime.

Steinhardt thus refused to answer the question about the broken glass either by simply confirming the interrogator's version or by telling the objective truth. Instead, he found a "third solution — unexpected and strange [*stranie*]: the lie" (ibid.: 14). So as not to incriminate his friend Nego, he stubbornly claimed to be unable to remember the broken glass episode, even though the shards of glass had, in fact, become sharply defined in his memory. This simple lie presupposed the ability to grasp and anticipate the tendentious logic of the interrogator and concoct an answer that the latter would deem innocent and non-incriminating. At the same time, it required that Steinhardt renounce his former values — such as objective truth — in order to transmit a fundamental truth that he believed in — his

and Nego's innocence. This is a dangerous path to take, since, as the *Kubark* explains, pressuring the suspect to renounce his or her values is a crucial aim of interrogation: "As the sights and sounds of the outside world fade away, its significance for the interrogatee tends to do likewise. The world is replaced by the interrogation room, its two occupants [interrogator and suspect], and the dynamic relationship between them. As interrogation goes on, the subject tends increasingly to divulge or withhold in accordance with the values of the interrogation world, rather than those of the outside world" (Central Intelligence Agency 1997a [1963]: 58). Steinhardt's strange solution is based on the renunciation of the outside world values: but instead of latching on to the interrogation room values (here, indiscriminate confession), he redefines his value system and chooses to lie in order to resist his interrogator's wish that he incriminate himself and his friend. By so doing, he overcomes what American psychiatrists called "an additional vulnerability of highly moral people" to Soviet style investigation, the fact "that they find it difficult to tell a lie under any circumstances" (Hinkle and Wolff 1956: 141). Steinhardt's solution lies in the ability to distance oneself from both outside world and interrogation room values. His eulogy to the "strange lie" closely recalls Joseph Brodsky's (1985: 7–8) famous lines: "The real history of consciousness starts with one's first lie. . . . My first lie had to do with my identity. Not a bad start." Brodsky's first lie strikingly resembles Steinhardt's: he refused to admit a truth about himself—his being Jewish— that would have incriminated him in the twisted logic of the regime. This lie becomes the foundation of a liberating everyday art of estrangement from both the self and the world. "Marx's dictum that 'existence conditions consciousness' was true only for as long as it takes consciousness to acquire the art of estrangement; thereafter, consciousness is on its own and can both condition and ignore existence" (ibid.: 3).[22]

Steinhardt's first lie also "had to do with [his] identity," which had at that moment become grounds for incrimination: "You are not accused for what you have done, but rather for what you are" (Steinhardt 1997 [1990]: 240).[23] In the estranging light of the interrogation room, he realized that his former values, indeed his very identity, had been turned against him. According to the *Kubark*, this estrangement of the self or loss of autonomy saps resistance and induces the suspect to confess and divulge everything. At this moment, interrogation can be considered successfully closed. This was not true in the Soviet system, where the last stage of the interrogation was the conversion

22.  Shklovsky's play on Marx's dictum has been discussed by Boym (1998: 249).
23.  At this moment of characteristic lucidity, Steinhardt crisply summarized one of the main characteristics of Soviet-style criminology, its focus on a suspect's identity rather than on a specific crime. See Vatulescu 2004: 244–45.

and "reeducation" of the suspect that was to culminate in the creation of a "new man," a lengthy process that often continued during imprisonment.[24]

The Romanian secret police conducted some of the most extensive and savage experiments in reeducation. The Piteşti prison was the most notorious and best studied center of reeducation, and it provides a detailed if extreme reeducation scenario.[25] An informer chosen to match closely the profile of the prisoner was introduced in his or her cell with the aim of becoming "best friends." Once this goal was reached, the informer would abruptly turn against him or her. Given the intimate knowledge achieved, the tortures then applied became more horrible because personalized. For example, religious people were compelled to eat their feces and say thanks for "communion." This grueling process was meant to induce the prisoner to renounce all former values. Next, she or he had to write a fictitious biography made up of self-incriminating lies as well as trumped up denunciations of others. Finally, the prisoner was considered reeducated when she or he was ready to turn torturer and subject others to the same ordeals. As a consequence of this treatment, "the [reeducated] student would see the world as a god with two faces; the first, which he had thought was real, had now become unreal; the second, fantastic and ugly beyond any previous imaginings, had now become real . . . the lie was accepted as a biological necessity for survival" (Bacu 1971; quoted in Deletant 1995: 38).

Steinhardt's lie also secured his survival. Like most reeducated prisoners, he renounced his former values, such as objective truth. His lie appropriated the traumatic lesson of interrogation: the estrangement from a self that had been proved vulnerable to being taken apart and reassembled in a new ideological mold. Steinhardt turned this lesson to his own advantage—renouncing his former self, he did not let himself be reforged into an informer. He lied about himself, but his lie manipulated rather than obeyed his interrogator's wishes. And rather than writing a fictitious biography and turning into a communist new man, he wrote a journal that recorded his transformation into a different kind of new man—the road to the religious faith he found in prison.

However, writing as the medium for self-fashioning seemed "risky" to Steinhardt, since he believed that language was tainted by the experience of prison and of totalitarianism in general. Thus his literary criticism insisted on the theme "of the malefic power of words, usually less taken

24. The *Kubark* ends by drawing this distinction: unlike Western services, whose ultimate goal is to collect information, "the last step in an interrogation conducted by a Communist service is the attempted conversion" (Central Intelligence Agency 1997a [1963]: 103).

25. My account of reeducation draws on Dennis Deletant's authoritative history of the Romanian secret service, *Ceauşescu and the Securitate* (1995), especially 29–51.

into consideration than the benefic one" (Steinhardt 1991: 61). He prefaced his article "Everything about the Power of Words" with a quotation from Adrian Păunescu, the flashy poet of the Ceauşescu regime, who occasionally turned dissident: "It doesn't matter what was real, words make all they want out of the world" (ibid.: 61). In response to this quotation, he argued: "Words are always capable of dissimulating an unpleasant or unwanted reality or to do violence to an indifferent one. . . . The paradox of the *strange* and constant victory [of words over reality] has been proved and rendered banal by totalitarian and dogmatic regimes, where the accent has fallen without exception on writing and telling (corollary: the necessity of a ministry of propaganda)" (ibid.: 62; my emphasis). Expressing what he perceives as his new self through words was always a challenge. Thus after his baptism in the prison cell, Steinhardt (1997 [1990]: 84) exclaimed: "New, I am a new man. . . . All that was old has passed, look, all things are new. . . . New, but unsayable. Words I cannot find, except banal, stale, the same ones I always use. I am in the middle of the chalk circle of known words and of ideals taken from daily scenery." While directly referring to Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Steinhardt adds his own touch: the routine-laden chalk circle is made of words, and its prisoner is the self. "The malefic power" of words is rooted in a degradation, which he follows in detail: "There is a degradation. In the beginning there was the Word, the Logos. Humans are given the word. The word is degraded to empty chatter, which turns into automatisms, then to slogans" (ibid.: 51). In front of this degradation, "the contact with artistic chefs d'oeuvre succeeds in breaking the spell, and as such establishes direct contact with God" (ibid.: 52). Steinhardt's description of the automatization of the world and the ability of artworks to break this spell almost literally recalls Shklovsky's description of artistic estrangement. However, for Steinhardt, automatization was not simply routine but rather a religiously marked fall and a politically coercive device; and conversely, the estranging power of art became both a spiritual and a political weapon.

Let us return to the question that the imaginary tribunal asked Brecht: "'Now tell us, Mr. Brecht, are you really in earnest?'" and consider his answer, "I would have to admit that no, I'm not completely in earnest. I think too much about artistic problems, you know, about what is good for the theater, to be completely in earnest" (Benjamin 1977: 87). His sincere answer about not being sincere was at least partly determined by the fact that this is a polite imaginary tribunal. They address him as Mr. Brecht. The actual interrogators addressed Steinhardt much less politely, in ways in which he had never thought of himself—as a criminal. Their estrang-

ing address questioned his whole value system, including such concepts as truth and sincerity. His answer to the interrogator's question was not at all in earnest; it was a lie that he proudly described as strange, well-concocted, and crafty. The eulogy to the "lie" that "has to do with one's identity" connects not only Brodsky and Steinhardt but also the advocates and victims of reeducation. Indeed, Steinhardt and Brodsky's subversive autobiographical narratives surprisingly share a lot with the reeducation narrative. They are all conversion narratives, which tell the story of a "rebirth," seen as the "real birth." The "lie" is the fulcrum of these conversion narratives, the turning point between the incriminating estrangement of one's given identity and the creation of a new identity. The difference lies, of course, in the direction of the turn. In the reeducation scenario, the radical estrangement and breaking of the self lead to the adoption of the official mold of the communist new man. Steinhardt and Brodsky took private turns that required a double estrangement: both from the establishment and from their former identities. The lie translated the self for a dangerous environment, both expressing and dissimulating it when needed.

Shklovsky also experienced estrangement of the self and flirted with self-estrangement as a subversive art of living. However, he soon relinquished it and turned to writing a memoir. While modeled on a trial deposition, his memoir was not a conversion narrative. As the trial depositions of the convicted SRs show, this was still possible in 1922, when the Stalinist narrative of conversion and rebirth was not yet fully established. Unlike the victims of the Stalinist show trials of the 1930s, Shklovsky, as the accused in the SR trial, did not confess to his alleged crimes, nor did he undergo a rebirth. Rather than performing the miracle of reforging the self, Shklovsky's memoirs reveal the drama of an individual caught in the cross fire of his times. His art was based on juxtaposing irreconcilables rather than synthesizing them into a new set of values.

Studies of Shklovsky's ostranenie often start with the thorny problem of terminology and translation. There is estrangement and e*n*strangement, making it strange, defamiliarization, and de-automatization. Benjamin Sher (1990: xix) notes that "estrangement" is a good translation, but "too negative and limited," whereas "making it strange" is "also good, but too positive." And indeed, ostranenie is an ambiguous term, not just positive, not just negative. I have not started by cleaning up this ambiguity in the belief that it is instructive. The many overlapping, contentious, and complicit terms for ostranenie suggest that there are many "different kinds" of estrangement that coexist in entangled relationships to each other. By adding terms like revolutionary, secret police, and interrogation room estrangement, I attempted not only to reveal a darker side of estrangement but

also to draw attention to the constitutive mixtures between the artistic and the political histories of this concept. In particular, estrangement appeared deeply involved in the politicized fashioning of the subject during Soviet times. The effects of estrangement upon the self were certainly not limited to the therapeutic value ascribed to artistic estrangement; rather, they ranged widely between estrangement of the self—a key device in interrogation and reeducation practices—and self-estrangement—an empowering device of survival and subversion.

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