

ZOO, OR LETTERS NOT ABOUT LOVE. By *Viktor Shklovsky*. Translated from the Russian and edited by *Richard Sheldon*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971. xxxiii, 164 pp. \$7.95.

This epistolary collage, first published in Berlin in 1923 during Shklovsky's brief and troubled exile, is, at one level, an unabashedly candid record of his ardent infatuation with Elsa Triolet, an attractive yet tantalizingly aloof Russian émigré who later became Louis Aragon's wife, and a French author in her own right. The "documentary" nature of the proceedings is enhanced by the fact that seven of the letters contained in *Zoo* were actually written by Elsa Triolet; as Richard Sheldon reminds us (p. xxi), they proved to be the debut of her literary career. Yet, characteristically, the hero's love for "Alya" is treated here much of the time as a *literary* motif—more exactly a "motivation"—for composing an unorthodox novel in letters, "based," in Iurii Tynianov's words, "on unusual material" (p. xxxi).

If the central literary strategy of Shklovsky's wide-ranging memoir *A Sentimental Journey* is a "semantic shift," *Zoo* is built around a kindred and equally Shklovskian device, that of displacement. Since the "heroine" of the book forbids her admirer to write to her about love, his letters circle uneasily around the taboo subject as they range from "urban landscapes" to sketches of Russian literati stranded in Berlin, from "bourgeois" table manners to literary theory. Predictably, the enforced detours turn, to quote Sheldon again, into "metaphors of [the speaker's] own plight" (p. xxviii). The strenuous protestations ("I am not going to write about love"), the ingenious yet transparent subterfuges converge to drive home compellingly, if obliquely, the inescapability and the anguish of unrequited love.

To a fellow Formalist—Iurii Tynianov—*Zoo* was a path-breaking literary experiment. "The book is interesting," he wrote, "in that a single emotional core provides the basis for a novel, and a feuilleton, and a scholarly paper" (p. xxxi). Viewed in retrospect, Shklovsky's self-conscious and form-conscious performance is apt to raise other, and more disturbing, questions. When the troubleshooter of Russian Formalism avers, "You see, Alya? I never write about anything but literature" (p. 123), his self-irony comes close to unmasking his vaunted literary purism as a moral stratagem—a screen for repressed or displaced personal emotion. By the same token, when on the eve of his return to Russia he symbolically surrenders to the powers that be—"My youth and self-assurance have been taken away from me. . . . I raise my hand and surrender" (p. 104)—the gesture prefigures an actual capitulation in 1930 and the subsequent, still more dismal accommodations.

Whatever one's reaction to this curious and occasionally moving blend of whimsy and self-pity (my own feelings are decidedly mixed), Cornell University Press and Richard Sheldon have again earned our plaudits by producing a highly satisfying English version of an interesting literary document. Sheldon's translation is excellent; his introduction is informative and lucid. I am not entirely happy with his definition of the *Opoiaz* as "a coalition of linguists and futurists founded by Shklovsky in 1914" (p. 147), but, on the whole, the notes are accurate and helpful. One is also grateful for the careful notation of rather significant differences between the four successive editions of *Zoo*.

VICTOR ERLICH
Yale University