Anja Tippner

VIKTOR SHKLOVSKII'S *MARKO POLO–RAZVEDCHIK*: MEDIEVAL HISTORY VS. GEOPOETIC REPRESENTATION OF IMPERIAL SPACE[1]

This article discusses Shklovskii's children's book about Marco Polo as both a historical narrative and a geographical one. The writer started working on *Marko Polo* during a time in Soviet history when the country was experiencing the creation of a new Soviet geography with its radical reconfiguration of surrounding landscapes. In many ways, Shklovskii's narrative reflected the Soviet fascination with geography and topography. Part historical biography, part adventure story, part travelogue, the *Marko Polo* story narrates the life of the Venetian traveler and explorer on the basis of Marco Polo's own account. Adapted for Soviet children, the story of this medieval traveler successfully conveyed the new Soviet geopoetic discourse: the events of far removed history were filtered and filled with the new importance allotted to geography in the Soviet school curriculum.

Key words: Marko Polo, travelogue, adventure story, reconfiguration, geopoetics, medieval history.

Viktor Shklovskii the well-known formalist theoretician and writer was a master of many genres and subjects. Among the many books he wrote during his long life were also children's books. In the 1930s he published several versions of a biography of Marco Polo with the publishing house *Molodaia gvardiia* that led to a book on Marko Polo in the series *Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei* ("Life of Remarkable People") [Shklovskii 1936][2]. This book was reprinted in 1969 in a revised version for children under the title *Zemli razvedchik: Istoricheskaia povest'* and was published also with Molodaiia gvardiia in the series "Pioner — znachit pervyi" ("Pioneer is the first") [Shklovskii 1969]. Shklovskii's children's book about Marco Polo is not only a historical narrative, but also a geographical one. He started working on Marko Polo during a time in Soviet history when the country was experiencing the creation of a new Soviet geography as well as a radical reconfiguration of landscapes and history. Part historical biography, part adventure story, part travel book, the Marko Polo-book narrates the life of the Venetian traveler and explorer on the basis of Marko Polo's own account.

The story of Marko Polo had been passed on through the ages in several versions in French, Italian and Latin, and it was only in the 1920s that a scholarly edition was published. Shklovskii recounts the journey that Marco Polo undertook together with his father Niccolò and his uncle Maffeo. The Venetian merchants and traders spent almost 25 years on the road and spent time in Mongolia, Persia, China and India, among others. Their journey took them to many countries that later became part of the Russian Empire and that in the 20th Century constituted the Soviet Union — as for example Azerbaidzhan, Armenia, Uzbekistan, and parts of Siberia.

Shklovskii's books on Marko Polo convey the Soviet fascination with geography and topography[3]. With their focus on travel, space, and their abundant descriptions of geographical phenomena, they were in tune with the new importance allotted to geography in the school curriculum. As Orlova notes, there was a need to describe the Soviet lands not only by citing dry data and statistics but by describing the enormous spaces, different people, the abundant and varied nature[4]. Vivid geographical descriptions were vital for engaging the Soviet people in the numerous industrial projects that went on in faraway places, and Shklovskii's Marko Polo catered to this need. His book is also a good example of a biography of an extraordinary person who "moved mankind ahead", a category that was very popular in the Soviet Union and that was institutionalized in the monumental series *Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei* founded by Gor'kii. In its capacity as a historical book Shklovskii's rewriting of Marko Polo's own travel account fits nicely into the landscape of early 1930's children's literature. Marina Balina has stated that the "combination of historical information and didacticism as well as learning by example (uchit'sia na velikikh primerakh) with adventure plots"[5] made historical fictions especially popular in Stalin's Soviet Union. By the mid-1930s, when Shklovskii published the extended version of his 1931 text, the concept of "great men" who led by example was well put into place. Historical fiction has always been used to retrofit historical facts for the use of contemporary discourse, and Shklovskii's book is an example for such a retrofitting. Last not least, it is also a pertinent example for conflicting histories, since the double alterity of Marko Polo's original book — the medieval mindset as well as the orientalism, evident in the stories of wizards, magi and strange animals — clashed with Soviet concepts of internationalism and science, and had to be adapted for Soviet readers.

With *Marko Polo — razvedchik* Shklovskii tries his hand again at geopoetical writing, something he had done earlier in his memoir *Sentimental*

journey [Shklovskii 2002][6]. This memoir of his peripatetic life during the late 1910's and the Civil Wars covers some of the territory described in Marko Polo's journeys, namely the south-eastern parts of the Soviet Union and part of Persia, and it is a text clearly marked by geopoetical aspirations. Kenneth White coined the term "geopoetics" in order to describe projects that border between geography and poetics, between concrete and imaginary spaces, between science and literature [See: White 1987]. With geopoetical literature writers become geographers, much the same way as Marko Polo became a writer by being an explorer. This article wants to examine the relations between geography and poetics in Shklovskii's book *Marko Polo — razvedchik*, that is the way in which the literary critic and writer constructs geographical spaces as symbolical spaces through the different genres (biography, adventure story, travel book) he incorporates in his text. As will be argued here, Shklovskii not only describes the life and travels of Marko Polo but he also attempts to envisage a common Eurasian space and creates a geopoetics for Soviet children.

ADVENTURE STORY

Adventure stories lend themselves quite naturally to geographical descriptions. Adventure stories as a genre were created in the second half of the 19th century[7]. Crucial for the adventure plot as such is that the mostly male hero leaves his home, so that he can enter the home foreign lands opposition where his adventures are played out[8]. Most adventure books take place in exotic settings of the jungle, the arctic or the desert, and often enough the motif of travel is combined with one of discovery or rivalry. It is no coincidence that the adventure story is closely linked with colonialism and imperialism[9]. The Soviet attitude towards adventure stories thus was ambivalent, on the one hand it was conceived of as imperialistic and on the other it proved to be useful for telling the story of polar expeditions, as for example in Kaverin's very popular book *Dva kapitana* from the late 1930s. Even more than travel accounts and academic works, the popular adventure story contributed to create an image of non-European lands, including climates, geography and customs of the native people. As Richard Phillips notes: "Adventure stories constructed a concrete (rather than purely abstract) cultural space that <…> mapped social totality in a manner that was imaginatively accessible and appealing to the people" [Phillips 1997, p. 12] All this holds true for Shklovskii's *Marko Polo*: He also leaves home in order to discover strange climes and new customs, even if his

motif to do so was primarily financial, and he is not an ordinary adventurer but a commercial trader. In order to make this point, Shklovskii cites Karl Marx from *Das Kapital,* "The ancient trading people existed in an intermediate space like the Gods of Epicurus, or more precisely, like the Jews in Polish society"[10] [Shklovskii 1969, p. 76]. To him, the Polo family members are not explorers but people visiting their next of kin, when they visit to far away trading posts. Though, their quest to reach still more distant trading posts and gather more exotic goods turns them into adventurers. Russia, is counted among the foreign countries that the Polo's travel to [Shklovskii 1969, p. 38–39]. As the Formalist writer points out, the travelers were only able to see what they could see from their traders' point of view, dividing the world in buyers and customers as they did. [Shklovskii 1969, p. 57] This also implies that the foreign people they encounter as partners in trade are treated as partners. What he depicts is the way of mastering space not by way of exploration but by way of looking for deals and new trading goods. This take on history implies that the heroism that usually is found in adventure stories had to be downplayed by Shklovskii, since the notion of a heroic trader did not conform to Soviet ideas.

Shklovskii's thus book does not depict the Chinese or the Mongolians as hostile or orientalize them, they appear to be friendly, hospitable, and pose none of the danger, initially needed for an adventure story or customary in Russian images of the Golden Horde and its reign in Russia. The only truly negative chapter heading "A Model of Hell" is not concerned with life among the Chinese, the Tatars, or the Mongolians or travels through deserts or rough ocean crossings, but with Polo's confinement in a Genoese prison after his return. In the end of the book, Shklovskii depicts a melancholic, misunderstood and sad Marco Polo who "skuchaet", longs for the adventures of Mongolia, China and India, who feels more at home in the world of the Mongolian Khan than in his Venetian homeland.

TRAVEL BOOK

As Shklovskii likes to point out, Marco Polo was a "puteshestvennik" (a traveler) and his writing is fueled by his curiosity and colored by his imagination, filling out the gaps [Shklovskii 1969, p. 128]. But Shklovskii does not go along with the sensationalist or fantastic depictions that pepper Polo's book. In many ways, he presents the Soviet readers with a duller version of Marco Polo. What is gone in Shklovskii's rendition is for example the strange custom in the city of Chandu to "to cook

and eat" the bodies of lawfully condemned and executed", omitted are the eagles that are trained to hunt wolves, gone are the people of Kashcar who live close to the Soviet-Chinese border who are described by Polo as "a wretched, niggardly set of people" who "eat and drink in miserable fashion"[11]. Instead the Venetian traveler are confronted with examples of superior technology and science, and an elaborate and advanced artistic culture. The Chinese have newspapers and literary almanacs and astronomical observatories that did not exist or could not be rivaled in Europe at the time.

All in all, Shklovskii's aim is to convey only those things from Marco Polo's book that are correct ("pravil'no") by modern standards [Shklovskii 1969, p. 45], and mostly favorable for the cultures in question. He points out that they were parts in Marco Polo's book that rely only on hearsay and others that were based on his own observations [Shklovskii 1969, p. 66], and he also points out that the book does not even contain all that Polo knew since he wanted to keep some of this trading secrets from the Genoese [Shklovskii 1969, p. 69]. Since many of the lands described by Polo at the time of Shklovskii's writing made part of the Soviet landscape they are depicted with regard to cultural achievements and the usefulness of these people and places for a new world order that is not mentioned. If Shklovskii's Polo encounters things that are decidedly not right, he does not try to change them or comment on them. He is a distanced traveler and observer, someone who does not really engage in the cultures he encounters. Shklovskii's book thus, is a great example of de-orientalization of geographies and peoples as well. As the Formalist points out: "China was far ahead Europe at this time" [Shklovskii 1969, p. 180]. Shklovskii's rendering of Polo's observations seem to aim at correcting the prevalent orientalism of pre-revolutionary Russian literature about the East and Siberia. His travels and his writings thus put Marko Polo ahead of his times and he tried to take his contemporaries with him, moving them "vpered" [Shklovskii 1969, p. 180]. This resembles a famous phrase from Kaverin's very popular adventure story, *Dva kapitana*, where Kaverin notes that explorers and adventurers "move forward mankind and science" [Kaverin 2004, p. 474][12].

Anne Dwyer has pointed out that Shklovskii in his Civil War writings was concerned with the borders and the periphery of Russia, with the "okraina" [Dwyer 2009, p.15]. As with his Civil War writings, so in his Marko Polo book Shklovskii resists using the Russian version of orientalism while describing Central Asia, China or Persia. Instead he makes use of the Italian manuscript to de-orientalize the East. This

de-orientalization has also implications for images of the Russian empire. Relying on Marco Polos descriptions of Eastern superiority when it came to technologies like printing, economics, namely the introduction of paper money, the Chinese are far ahead of Europe be it Italy or Russia. Travelling east and covering vast distances he does not feel homesick, but feels at home with the nomads instead. This is underscored by the fact that Shklovskii does not dwell on incidences of misunderstanding or malfunctioning communication. Several times he refers to Marko Polo's linguistic prowess, writing that he spoke several languages — among them Chinese, Mongolian, and Arabic — and was able to write more fluently in some of these than in his native Italian. In focusing on what would later become Russian and Soviet "contact zones" [Pratt 1992, p. 2] — social spaces where Russians and non-Russians — met, he points his Soviet readers to their own periphery. But what he makes them see through the eyes and travels of Marco Polo is not the "redundancy, discontinuity, and unreality" [p. 2] that usually reign in euroimperialistic travel writing as Mary Louise Pratt has noted, but abundance and progress. He turns Polo's travels into an exercise in curiosity and objectivity thus heavily re-writing and editing the original text that does not lack in orientalism as well as in prejudice.

BIOGRAPHY

In his *Sentimental Journey* Shklovskii wrote: "Do not attempt to make history, rather create your own biography" [Shklovskii 2002, p. 114]. And in one of his essays on children's literature he pointed out, that it is not easy to write biographies, because one has to take the times as well as the circumstances into account, in order to give the full picture without resorting to what he calls "chronology" [Shklovskii 1966, p. 141]. In some ways, his *Marko Polo* realizes a vision of Walter Benjamin who imagined a new form of life writing that is structured by space and moves ahead not chronologically but spatially [Benjamin 1970, p. 12–13]. This is underscored by the fact that Shklovskii remains quite vague with regard to the time frame of Polo's travels, resorting to summary phrases, not indicating precise dates, instead his book relies not on a temporal but on a spatial dynamic. With regard to another aspect of biographical writing, Shklovskii tries to do something new too, since he is critical of Soviet biographies that border on the hagiographic [Shklovskii 1966, p. 38], and argues for more realistic models of life-writing. In his depiction of Marko Polo's life and times, he tries to avoid hagiography as well as exaggeration, which make his text border on the dull sometimes.

At first glance, a Venetian merchant might seem to be a strange choice for a Soviet biography, but at the second glance Shklovskii's choice is not as strange. First of all, the pantheon of 1930's biography for children was very varied and ranged from trusted and proven Bolshevik heroes such as Chapaev and Lenin over Russian Czars like Peter the Great to inventors and explorers like Amundsen and Pasteur, i. e. personalities without a communist or even progressive agenda. They nevertheless became Soviet role models due to their individual achievements. In Shklovskii's opinion, Marco Polo's achievement obviously lies not in his success as merchant but in the pure fact that he left home, traveled the world and wrote about it. In this desire to explore, to get to know the unknown, to reach limits and frontiers in which he ressembled another 'explorer of unrestricted lands', Iurii Gagarin, and thus another model Soviet children were supposed to emulate. In Shklovskii's depiction, Marco Polo is someone who moved mankind ahead, who opened up new horizons and thus became an exemplary man. For Shklovskii the fact that Polo's contemporaries didn't believe him, thinking his travels were purely imaginary, is as much prove as there is needed. Polo is an example because what he did was unheard of, because the things he described did not have names in Italian and were beyond the imagination of his contemporaries.

Shklovskii takes great care to point out that Marko Polo was so far ahead of his time and contemporaries that these did not believe him that they mocked him and made fun of him, calling him a liar [Shklovskii 1969, p. 186]. He describes Polo's deathbed scene:

> We encounter the old and dying Polo, as well as a monk who is giving him the last rites asks him to repent and to confirm that there are no such things as stones that burn, metal plates from which books can be printed and that a sea passage to India is not possible [Shklovskii 1969, p. 189].

Stressing once again the fact, that Marko Polo did not lie, that he was far ahead of his time, so far ahead that his writings were considered to be heretic. But Polo does not recant, he does not renounce from his own writings. Instead he teaches the priest a lesson in tolerance and open mindedness since he points out the fact that there a different beliefs and religions, and that they should not be judged [Shklovskii 1969, p. 189–190]. He also insists on a worldview that is decidedly non-Ptolemaic, an opinion that puts him on par with the astronomer Galileo Galilei. All in all, Marko Polo is a "primer" (an example) to use Gorkii's term, an "obrazec" (a model) for a person who stays true to his beliefs even if his surroundings are against them [Günther 1993, p. 92]. Even the threat of eternal hell does not make him waver in his traveler's belief.

The Venetian traveler is a role model in other ways, too. The 1969 preface to Shklovskii's book takes up the term "razvedchik" (explorer) that he already used in the 1930s edition but that now after its politicial misuse in High Stalinism has to be explained and qualified. If Marko Polo can be perceived as a "razvedchik" then not in the sense of him being a chekist, but in the sense of him being a scout or a member of a reconnaissance mission, thus presenting him as a kind of Soviet pioneer who explores the world for the sake of humankind. The image is taken from Shklovskii's last sentences in which the traveler is also called a "scout" and an explorer. An image, that is not really supported by Shklovskii's narrative which is — as shown — less concerned with adventure and more concerned with geography and making space. In this capacity, Shklovskii's Marco Polo is a man from the future, a "man from the future", someone who travels for the sake of traveling and seeing the unknown [Shklovskii 1969, p. 189]. Marco Polo is drifting, driven by commercial interest that Shklovskii mentions from time to time. The diagram of his life is made up of places and spaces and not of dates and events. His biography is a story of movements and exploration and not of inventions or achievements[13]. And one of his greatest achievements lies in the fact that he facilitated the travels and ensuing discoveries of Christopher Columbus.

CONCLUSION

Shklovskii's book is — if not a good one — an interesting one. He stays in line with the internationalism of Soviet children's books by "Sovietizing" Marco Polo thus depriving himself of some of the devices that are crucial to adventure stories and even travel books: the other as other. As noted, in his rendering there are no hostile natives, no bloodthirsty Mongolians that want to kill the Europeans, even the climate seems to be more accommodating in Siberia and Mongolia than in Venice, which is described as cold and humid. Shklovskii's geopoetic vision of the Euro-Asian landmass is also a new vision of history, since it in some ways corrects the prevalent Russian image of Mongolian rule and life under the Golden Horde. Progress in history is depicted in *Marko Polo* as the constant craving to fight against the emptiness of space, to conquer vast territories and to gain profit from them. A dynamic, that was not uncommon to the Soviet Union. What Soviet children could learn from Marko Polo was that mastering space [Schlögel 2003, p. 46] was possible, that you could cover great distances and explore territories even under the most adverse circumstances and without the help of technology.

An attitude very much asked for, in order to shape and exploit the vast lands in Siberia and Central Asia. Another lesson that Shklovskii wanted to pass on was the message of tolerance that Marco Polo embodied for him. For Shklovskii, culture did neither reside in Europe, nor in the Mediterranean, nor could its cradle be found in Italy, Arabia, or China. In his view, culture is the result of the combined efforts of "all mankind all over the world" [Shklovskii 1969, p. 194]. He thus wants to draw attention to the periphery of the Soviet empire and takes the conflict out of history, exploration, and imperialism. And last not least, maybe one of the most important lessons of Shklovskii's book is ascribed to a *russkii chelovek*, to *Afanasii Nikitin* who other than the Polos loves his own country. Shklovskii writes, the more you know about the world, the more you love your home [p. 56].

References

[1] I would like to thank Marina Balina for her insightful comments and criticism. I have also benefited from Andrea Lanoux's comments on an earlier version of this article.

[2] The book saw several editions in the 1930s. The first edition dates from 1931. This was a much shorter version but already sported the *razvedchik* in the sense of "explorer" as an addendum to the proper name. See: [Shklovskii 1931].

[3] See for example: [Dobrenko, Naiman 2003; Widdis 2001, p. 401–411].

[4] Compare: [Orlova 2008].

[5] This idea was expressed in Balina's paper presented at the children's literature conference in St. Petersburg, Russia, in June of 2014. I am using this material with the permission of the author.

[6] The Marco Polo book as well as the Sentimental journey feature chapters on the "Nestorian" or Aizors. See: [Shklovsky 1969, p. 74–76].

[7] Klotz Volker. Abenteuerromane. Reinbek b. Hamburg, 1989; Another definition of "adventure" with regard to film can be found in Seeßlen, Georg / Kling Bernt. "Abenteuer", in dies Unterhaltung. Lexikon zur populären Kultur. Reinbek, 1977.

[8] Another fundamental aspect of the adventure story as narrative is the engagement with the extraordinary and the opposition of "home-foreign". See: [Klotz 1989, p.18].

[9] Ee e.g. [Green 1991]. Empire Boys. Adventures in a Man's World. London.

[10] All translations from Russian into English are mine unless otherwise notified.

[11] Compare: [Polo 1993]. On orientalism in Polo see [Campbell 1988].

[12] «Такие капитаны двигают вперед человечество и науку».

[13] This is used as analogy to the term "Bewegungsgeschichte" that has be coined by K. Schlögel [Schlögel 2003, p. 368].

Sources

Kaverin V. Dva kapitana. M.: OLMA-PRESS, 2004/

Shklovskii V. Marko Polo razvedchik. Moskva: GIIUDL, Molodaia Gvardiia, 1931.

Shklovskii V. Marko Polo. (Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei). Moskva: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1936.

Shklovskii V. Zemli razvedchik: istoricheskaia povest'. Moskva: Molodaiia Gvardiia, 1969.

Shklovskii V. Sentimental'noe puteshestvie // Shklovskii V. Eshche nichego ne konchilos'. Moskva, 2002.

Polo Marco The Travels of Marco Polo. The Complete Yule-Cordier Edition. Vol. I. N. Y., 1993.

Studies

Benjamin W. Berliner Chronik. Frankfurt a. M., 1970.

Campbell M. B. The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing *400–1600*. Ithaca, NY., 1988.

Dobrenko E., Naiman E. (ed.). The Landscape of Stalinism. The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space. Seattle/London, 2003.

Dwyer A. Revivifying Russia: Literature, Theory, and Empire in Viktor Shklovskii's Civil War Writings // Slavonica. 2009, Vol. 1, P. 11–31.

Green M. The Adventurous Male. Chapters in the History of the White Male Mind. University Park; Bristow, Joseph. 1991.

Günther H. Der sozialistische Übermensch: M. Gor´kij und der sowjetische Heldenmythos. Stuttgart; Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 1993.

Klotz V. Abenteuerromane. Reinbek b., Hamburg, 1989.

Orlova G. A. Za strokoiu uchebnika: kartograficheskaia politika i sovetskaia shkola v 1930-e gg. // Uchebnii tekst v sovetskoi shkole: Sbornik statei / Leont'eva S. G./ Maslinskii K.A. (ed.),. Sankt-Peterburg/Moskva, 2008. P. 77–104.

Phillips R. Mapping Men and Empires. A Geography of Adventure. London-N.Y., 1997.

Pratt M-L. Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation. London, 1992.

Schlögel K. Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit. Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik. München, 2003.

Shklovskii V. Rudol'f Dizel' L'va Gumileva // Shklovskii V. Staroe i novoe. Kniga stat'ej o detskoi literature. Moskva, 1966. P. 141–145.

White K. Éléments de géopoétique // White K. L'Ésprit nomade. Paris, 1987. P. 272–293.

Widdis E. The Aesthetic of Conquest in Soviet Cinema of the 1930s // European Studies. 2001. P. 401–411.