

A Note on Defamiliarization

The term was given to us by the Russian Formalists in the twentieth century. They were amongst the most intriguing thinkers on the subject of how literature actually works; how language become *literary*. Victor Shklovsky, who coined the phrase, was thinking of literature in mechanical terms; he wanted to know how a text works, in the same way that a mechanic wants to know how a car works – this is the analogy Shklovsky often used.

The Purpose of Defamiliarization

The aim is to set the mind in a state of radical unpreparedness; to cultivate the willing suspension of disbelief. We see and hear things as if for the first time. We see through the eyes, as Blake put it, instead of with them. In other words, the conventionality of our perceptions is put into question. We see the world afresh. This requires effort. We do not economize our creative effort in defamiliarization; instead we maximize it. By ‘making strange’ – *ostranenie* – we force the mind to rethink its situation in the world, and this requires an expenditure of effort.

The Formalists were fascinated by *Gulliver's Travels*; this was a founding text of defamiliarization. Swift lived in the century of lenses, and he decided to employ that fact imaginatively. Galileo had stared through his telescope back in 1610 and seen a universe vaster than any previously imagined, but he also saw the pockmarks on the moon's surface. The heavens were not a realm of perfection, as Aristotle had insisted. Later, Robert Hooke looked through his microscope and saw in vivid detail the features of the flea. An optical shift in both cases rearranged reality. Swift took the hint. Lilliput and

A Note on Defamiliarization

Brodingnag are the imaginative rearrangements of reality; rearrangements we might see if we gazed upon humanity through either telescopes or microscopes. The perspective changes the nature of the humanity it situates.

All vivid writing is to some degree defamiliarizing. When Marianne Moore says of the swan that it 'turns and reconnoitres like a battleship', she defamiliarizes the movement of the swan through the water by an act of radical pattern recognition. All figures of speech aim to defamiliarize; to render the familiar unfamiliar. If they fail it is because they are either inept or clichéd. A cliché is a form of defamiliarization which has had its time and become familiar. Constantin Brancusi said that modernism in the arts had become a necessity because the techniques of realism were now 'a confusion of familiarities'. When our literary techniques become a confusion of familiarities, then we are seeing with the eyes instead of through them. It is time to employ defamiliarization once more.

Those writers who have been labelled magic realists are experts in the technique. Here is the first line of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez: 'Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.'¹ The present has become the future; the future the present. The first defamiliarization here is chronological. The second is in the form of a teleological thump: the man we are about to be presented with will one day face a firing squad. He will presumably be killed by execution. And finally, we are presented with the notion of having to discover ice, of being taken by your father to witness a natural phenomenon as though it were an exotic circus act.

¹ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. by Gregory Rabassa (London: Penguin, 1970).

Myth, Metaphor and Science

When recording his album *In A Silent Way*, Miles Davis asked John McLaughlin to play the guitar 'as though you didn't know how to play the guitar'. The discarding of any superficial facility, so as to write as though we had not acquired a technique for writing, is the aim of defamiliarization. If it startles the reader it is probably because the writer has once more learned to be startled too.