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Viktor Shklovsky

A Reader

Edited and Translated by
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Art as Device

*(1917/1919)*¹

“Art is thinking in images.” You can hear his phrase from a schoolboy, and it also the starting point for a philologist beginning to construct a literary theory. This idea has been planted into many minds; Potebnya must be considered one of its creators. “Without images, art—including poetry—is impossible” (Potebnya, *Iz zapisok ...* 83), he writes; and elsewhere: “Poetry, like prose, is first and foremost a certain way of thinking and understanding” (*ibid.* 97).

Poetry is a particular method of thinking, namely, thinking in images; this method creates a certain economy of intellectual energy, “the sensation of relatively easy processing,” with the aesthetic sense being a reflex of this economy. This is how the Academy member Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky sums it up, and he must be right in his summary—after all, he has certainly read his mentor’s books with attention. Potebnya and his numerous followers consider poetry to be a special kind of thinking, namely, thinking in images; they believe that imagery is intended to bring together heterogenous acts and objects, explaining the unknown via the known. Or else, to quote Potebnya: “The image relates to the object of explanation as follows: a) the image is a constant predicate of variable subjects, a constant

¹Source: “Iskusstvo kak priem” in *Sborniki po teorii poeticheskogo yazyka III*. Tipografiya Sokolinskogo, 1919.

means of attracting² variable objects of apperception ...; b) the image is much simpler and clearer than the object of explanation" (ibid. 314), i.e. "the goal of imagery is to bring the meaning of the image closer to our understanding, without which imagery would have no sense; therefore, the image must be better known to us than the object of explanation" (ibid. 291).

One might wonder how this law applies when Tyutchev compares summer lightning to deaf-mute demons, or when Gogol likens the sky to God's chasuble.

"No art is possible without an image." "Art is thinking in images." Monstrous twists have been made in the name of these definitions; people have attempted to analyze music, architecture, lyrical poetry as "thinking in images." After wasting his energy for a quarter of a century, Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky was finally forced to single out lyric poetry, architecture, and music as special, imageless art forms, to define them as lyric arts that immediately appeal to emotion. Thus, an enormous sphere of art turned out not to be a method of thinking; one of the arts constituting this sphere, lyric poetry, is nevertheless very similar to "image-bearing" art: it uses words in the same way; most importantly, image-bearing art flows into imageless art quite imperceptibly, and we experience the two in similar ways.

Still, the definition "art is thinking in images"—and therefore (I'm leaving out the intermediate links of well-known equations), "art is, above all, the creator of symbols"—persists, surviving the collapse of the theory on which it was based. Most of all, it's alive in the symbolist movement. Particularly in the work of its theoreticians.

Thus, many people still believe that thinking in images—"ways and shadows," "furrows and boundaries"—is the main characteristic of

²The rare term *attraktsia* usually denotes the absence of grammatical connections between neighboring words; in this case, the missing connections seem to be semantic.

poetry.³ They should have expected the history of this image-bound art to be a history of changing imagery. But images turn out to be almost immobile; they flow, unchanging, from century to century, from country to country, from poet to poet. Images belong to “nobody” to “God.” The better you comprehend an epoch, the better can you see that the images you believed to be created by a particular poet are actually borrowed from others and almost unchanged. The work done by schools of poetry consists in accumulating verbal material and finding new ways of arranging and handling it; it’s much more about rearranging images than about creating them. Images are a given, and poetry is not so much thinking in images as remembering them.

In any case, thinking in images is not what unites all arts or even all literature; images are not the thing whose change drives poetry.

*

We know that expressions not created for artistic contemplation are often nevertheless experienced as poetic; compare Annensky’s belief in the poetic qualities of Slavonic or Andrey Bely’s admiration for the way Russian eighteenth-century poets place adjectives after nouns. Bely admires this as art, or rather as intentional art, though in reality it is merely a particularity of language (the influence of Church Slavonic). Therefore, a thing can be 1) created as prosaic and experienced as poetic; 2) created as poetic and experienced as prosaic. This suggests that a given work depends in its artistry—in whether or not this work is poetry—on our perception. In the narrow sense, we shall designate as “works of art” only such works which have been created by special devices intended to have them perceived as artistic.

³Allusions to symbolist writing: *Furrows and Boundaries* (1916) is a book of essays by Vyacheslav Ivanov; “ways and shadows” have been identified (Galushkin, “Footnotes” 490) as an ironic montage of Valery Bryusov’s collections *Ways and Crossroads* (1908) and *The Mirror of Shadows* (1912).

Potebnya's conclusion, which can be put as "poetry = imagery," has given rise to the whole theory of "imagery = symbolism," of the image as the invariable predicate of various subjects (this conclusion forms the basis of the theory of Symbolism; leading Symbolists—Andrey Bely and Merezhkovsky with his "eternal companions"—fell in love with it because of its similarity to their own ideas). This conclusion partly stems from the fact that Potebnya made no distinction between the language of poetry and the language of prose. This is why he failed to notice that two kinds of images exist: the image as a practical means of thinking, as a means of grouping objects—and the poetic image, as a means of intensifying an impression. Let me clarify with an example. Walking down the street, I see a man wearing an old crumpled hat drop his bag. I call him back: "You, old hat, you've dropped your bag!" This is an example of a purely prosaic trope. Another example. "This joke is old hat, I heard it ages ago."⁴ This image is a poetic trope. (In one case, the word "hat" was used metonymically, in the other, metaphorically. But this is not what I want to point out here.) The poetic image is a way to create the strongest possible impression. It is a device that has the same task as other poetic devices, such as ordinary or negative parallelism, comparison, repetition, symmetry, hyperbole; it is equal to that which is commonly designated as rhetorical figures, equal to all these methods of increasing the impact of a thing (words and

⁴To recreate the pun, the translation had to stray away from the original, which uses the double meaning of *shlyapa*—“hat” and “clumsy person.” The use of metonymy, such as “[you] hat” or “[you] glasses,” as a somewhat rude form of addressing strangers is more usual in Russian than in English. The fact that Shklovsky uses a dead metaphor as an example of a poetic image is problematic, as is the citing of clichéd sexual euphemisms as examples of *ostranenie* later in the essay. At other points, however, Shklovsky shows awareness of the fact that the effect of *ostranenie* can easily evaporate.

even sounds of the text itself are things, too). But the poetic image bears only superficial resemblance to images as fables, to patterns of thought,⁵ such as a girl calling a sphere “a little watermelon” (Ovсяniko-Kulikovsky 16–17). The poetic image is a device of poetic language. The prosaic image is a device of abstraction: a watermelon instead of a round lamp shade, or a watermelon instead of a head, merely abstracts a particular quality of an object. It’s like saying: head = sphere, watermelon = sphere. This is thinking, but it has nothing in common with poetry.

*

The law of the economy of creative effort is also generally accepted. Spencer, in his *Philosophy of Style*, wrote:

As the basis of all rules designating the choice and use of words we find one and the same main requirement: economy of attention . . . Leading the mind to the intended concept by the easiest route is often their only and always their most important goal.⁶

And R. Avenarius (8):

If the soul possessed inexhaustible strength, then, of course, it would be indifferent to how much might be spent from this inexhaustible source; only the expended time would play any role. But since its strength is limited, we can expect that the soul seeks

⁵ *Obraz myslei* (lit. the *image of thought*) is the Russian for “thought patterns” or “mentality.”

⁶ The translation used by Shklovsky departs from the original in many aspects, for instance, downplaying the fact that Spencer refers to speech as much as to writing: “On seeking for some clue to the law underlying these current maxims, we may see shadowed forth in many of them, the importance of economizing the reader’s or the hearer’s attention. To so present ideas that they may be apprehended with the least possible mental effort, is the desideratum towards which most of the rules above quoted point” (Spencer 7).

to carry out apperceptive processes as purposefully as possible—that is, with, in relative terms, the least expenditure of energy, or, to put the same thing differently, with the greatest result.

With a single reference to the general law of mental economy, Petrazhitsky dismisses James's theory of the physical basis of affect, a theory which happened to be in his way. The principle of the economy of creative effort, a seductive theory—particularly in the study of rhythm—has been affirmed by Alexander Veselovsky who followed in Spencer's footsteps: “The merit of style consists precisely in delivering the greatest amount of thoughts in the fewest words.” Andrey Bely, who in his better works gave numerous examples of challenging, stumbling rhythm and (for instance, in the work of Baratynsky) showed the laboriousness of poetic epithets—even he believes it necessary to speak of the law of the economy in his book, which constitutes a heroic effort to create a theory of art based on unverified facts from outdated books, on his vast knowledge of poetic techniques and on Krayevich's high school physics textbook.

Regarding economy as a law and goal of creation might be right for a particular linguistic case, namely “practical” language, but ignorance of the differences between the laws of practical and poetic language led to the idea of economy being applied to the latter. When Japanese poetic language was found to contain sounds never used in practical Japanese, this was one of the first, if not *the* first factual indication that these two languages are not identical (Polivanov 38). Yakubinsky's article (13–21), which states that the law of liquid consonant dissimilation is missing from poetic language and that in poetic language such hard-to-pronounce sound combinations are possible, is one of the first scientifically sound indications of the opposition (in this case, at least) between poetic language and practical language.

Therefore, we need to discuss the laws of spending and economy in poetic language based on its own workings, not on prosaic language.

Considering the laws of perception, we see that routine actions become automatic. All our skills retreat into the unconscious-automatic domain; you will agree with this if you remember the feeling you had when holding a quill in your hand for the first time or speaking a foreign language for the first time, and compare it to the feeling you have when doing it for the ten thousandth time. It is the automatization process which explains the laws of our prosaic speech, its under-structured phrases and its half-pronounced words. This process is ideally expressed in algebra, which replaces things with symbols. In quick practical speech, words are not spoken fully; only their initial sounds are registered by the mind. Pogodin (42) gives the example of a boy imagining the phrase “Les montagnes de la Suisse sont belles” as a series of letters: L, m, d, 1, S, s, b.

This property of thinking has suggested not only the path of algebra, but even the particular choice of symbols (letters, and especially initial letters). This algebraic way of thinking takes in things by counting and spatializing them;⁷ we do not *see* them but recognize them by their initial features. A thing passes us as if packaged; we know of its existence by the space it takes up, but we only see its surface. Perceived in this way, the thing dries up, first in experience, and then its very making suffers;⁸ because of this perception, prosaic speech is not fully heard (cf. Yakubinsky's article), and therefore not fully spoken (this is the reason for slips of the tongue). Algebraizing,

⁷The original *berutsia schetom i prostranstvom* (lit. “taken by counting and space”) is highly unidiomatic. It appears to mean “we recognize the object by its quantity and position in space” (without really seeing it)—but other readings are possible.

⁸This phrase might appear puzzling to a Russian reader, too; “the making of a thing” seems to refer to artistic creation and perhaps also to artistic perception.

automatizing a thing, we save the greatest amount of perceptual effort: things are either given as a single feature, for instance, a number, or else they follow a formula of sorts without ever reaching consciousness. “I was dusting in the room; having come full circle, I approached the sofa and could not remember if I had dusted it off or not. I couldn’t because these movements are routine and not conscious, and I felt I never could remember it. So if I had cleaned the sofa but forgotten it, that is if this was really unconscious, it is as if this never happened. If somebody had watched consciously, reconstruction would have been possible. But if nobody watched, if nobody watched consciously, if the whole life of many people is lived unconsciously, it is as if this life had never been” (Tolstoy 354; diary entry, February 29, 1897).⁹

This is how life becomes nothing and disappears. Automatization eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife and the fear of war.

“If the whole complex life of many people is lived unconsciously, it is as if this life had never been.”

And so, what we call art exists in order to give back the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make the stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things; the device of art is the “*ostranenie*” of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is its own end in art and must be prolonged. Art is the means to live through the making of a thing; what has been made does not matter in art.¹⁰

⁹ Actually, March 1.

¹⁰ This sentence (italicized in other publications) seems to be echoing the words of a poet: “Khlebnikov told me that the making matters, and not what has been made; what has been made are but wood shavings” (Shklovsky, *Gamburgskiy schet* [1990] 469). Khlebnikov was talking about the process of writing; while the completed text might not matter to the

The life of a poetic (artistic) text proceeds from seeing to recognizing, from poetry to prose, from the concrete to the general, from Don Quixote—a scholar and poor aristocrat, half-consciously suffering humiliation at a duke's court—to Turgenev's generalized and hollow Don Quixote, from Charles the Great to the mere name of "king."¹¹ Art and its works expand when dying: a fable is more symbolic than a poem, a saying more symbolic than a fable. This is why Potebnya's theory is least self-contradictory when discussing the fable, a genre which he was, in his own view, able to analyze in full. His theory did not fit "thingish" artistic texts, and thus Potebnya's book couldn't be finished.¹² As we know, *Notes on Literary Theory* were published in 1905, thirteen years after the death of their author. Potebnya himself could only complete the chapter on the fable (Potebnya, *Iz lektsii* ...).

Things that have been experienced several times begin to be experienced in terms of recognition: a thing is in front of us, we know this, but we do not see it (Shklovsky, *Voskresheniye slova*). This is why we cannot say anything about it. Art has different ways of de-automatizing things; in this article I would like to show one of the methods very frequently used by L. Tolstoy—the writer who, in Merezhkovsky's judgment, presents things the way he sees them, who sees things fully but does not change them.

Tolstoy's device of *ostranenie* consists in not calling a thing or event by its name but describing it as if seen for the first time, as if

writer, it certainly does to the reader. Alternatively, "what has been made" could refer to the images created by the reader in the process of reading.

¹¹ Shklovsky is referring to the essay "Hamlet and Don Quixote" (Turgenev); the Russian word for "king" (*korol*) derives from "Karl."

¹² The word *veshchnyy* ("material," "concrete," lit. "thingish") appears as a neologism to most Russian readers. However, Shklovsky probably was familiar with its use by Russian philosophers, above all the existentialist Nikolay Berdyaev. Shklovsky and Berdyaev shared in the tight-knit Russian community in Berlin; Shklovsky has listened to at least one of his lectures (Gul 223).

happening for the first time. While doing so, he also avoids calling parts of this thing by their usual appellations; instead, he names corresponding parts of other things. Here is an example. In the article “Ashamed,” L. Tolstoy enstranges the concept of flogging: “people who have broken the law are denuded, thrown down on the floor, and beaten on their behinds with sticks,” and a couple of lines later: “lashed across their bare buttocks.” There is a postscript: “And why this particular stupid, barbaric way of inflicting pain, and not some other: pricking the shoulder or some other body part with needles, squeezing arms or legs in a vice, or something else of this sort.”

I apologize for this disturbing example, but it is typical of Tolstoy’s way to reach conscience. The customary act of flogging is enstranged both by the description and by the proposal to change its form without changing its essence. Tolstoy used the method of *ostranenie* constantly: in one case, “Strider”,¹³ the narrator is a horse, and things are enstranged not by our own perception, but by that of a horse. Here is what the horse made of the institution of property:

What they were saying about flogging and Christianity, I understood well, but I was quite in the dark about the words “his own,” “his colt,” which made me realize that people saw some kind of connection between me and the equerry. What this connection was, I just couldn’t understand back then. Only much later, separated from the other horses, did I begin to understand. But back then I simply could not understand what it meant when they called *me* someone’s property. The words “*my* horse” described me, a living horse, and seemed as strange to me as the words “*my* land,” “*my* air,” “*my* water.”

However, these words had a strong effect on me. Thinking about this all the time, and only after the most diverse experiences with

¹³ The short story has also been published in English under its original title, “Kholstomer.”

people, did I finally understand what meaning they ascribe to these strange words. Their meaning is this: in life, people are ruled not by acts but by words. They love not so much the possibility of doing or not doing something as the possibility of talking about different things using certain words, on which they agree beforehand. Such are the words “my” and “mine,” which they use to talk about different things, creatures, topics, and even about land, about people, and about horses. They agree that only one person may say “mine” about any particular thing. And the one who says “mine” about the greatest number of things, in this game whose rules they’ve made up among themselves, is considered the happiest. Why this should be so, I don’t know, but this is how it is. For a long time, I’ve been trying to explain it to myself in terms of some direct benefit, but this turned out to be wrong.

For instance, many of those who called me their horse never rode me, while completely different people did. Neither did they feed me, but yet others did. The ones who were good to me were not those who called me their horse, either, but the coachman, the horse doctor, and people who didn’t know me at all. Later, having widened the scope of my observations, I realized that, not only in relation to us horses, the notion of *mine* had no basis apart from a low animal instinct people have, which they call property sense or property right. A man says “my house” and never lives in it but only worries about its building and upkeep. A merchant says “my shop,” “my cloth shop,” for instance, and does not have any clothes made from the best cloth in his own shop.

There are people who call a piece of land their own, but they have never seen this piece of land and never walked upon it. There are people who call other people their own though they have never seen these others, and all they do to these other people is harm

them. There are people who call women their women or their wives, but these women live with other men. And people do not strive to do what they consider good but to call as many things as possible their own. I am convinced now that this is the essential difference between people and us. This alone, not to mention other things in which we are better than people, is reason enough to say that we are higher up in the chain of being: their doings—at least to judge by those I knew—are guided by words, ours by deeds.

Toward the end of the story, the horse is killed, but the narrative method, the device, does not change:

Much later, Serpukhovsky's body, which had been walking about in the world, eating and drinking, was put into the ground. His skin, his meat and his bones were of no use.

Just as his dead body had been a great burden to everyone for 20 years while it was still walking about, so the putting away of this body into the ground created nothing but trouble. No one had cared about him for a long time, all this time he had been a burden to everyone; and yet the dead who bury their dead found it necessary to dress this bulky body, which had begun to rot so quickly, in a good uniform and good boots, to lay it in a new, good coffin with new tassels at all 4 corners, then to put this new coffin in another, leaden one, and to ship it to Moscow, and there to dig out old human bones and then use this particular place to hide this body, putrefying, swarming with maggots, in its new uniform and polished boots, and strew earth all over it.

Thus we see that at the end of the story, the device is liberated from the accidental motivation for its use.

Tolstoy also applies this device to all battles in *War and Peace*. They are all presented as, first and foremost, strange. I will not

quote these long descriptions—this would mean copying out quite a considerable part of a four-volume novel. Tolstoy also uses this method in describing salons and the theater:¹⁴

Most of the stage was covered with flat boards; by the sides stood painted pictures showing trees, and at the back, a cloth was stretched on boards. Girls in red bodices and white skirts were sitting in the middle of the stage. A very fat one in a white silk dress was sitting separately on a narrow bench, which had some green cardboard glued behind. They were all singing something. When they had finished their song, the girl in white approached the prompter's box, and a man in silken pants stretched tightly over his fat legs, with a plume, approached her, and began singing and spreading his arms. The man in the tight pants sang first, and then the girl sang. After that, both stopped, music boomed out, and the man began to finger the hand of the girl in the white dress, apparently waiting, as before, to begin singing his part with her. Then they sang together, and everyone in the theater began to clap and shout, and the men and women on stage, who had been pretending to be lovers, were bowing, smiling and spreading their arms.

In the second act, there were paintings pretending to be monuments, and there were holes in the cloth pretending to be the moon, and the shades on the footlights were raised, and trumpets and basses were playing, and from right and left came many people wearing black gowns. The people started waving their arms, and they were

¹⁴ None of the existing translations of *War and Peace* fully recreates the *ostranenie* of such intentionally clumsy expressions as “painted pictures.” The quotation below follows Shklovsky’s text, which makes several omissions and differs from Tolstoy’s in using figures instead of words in reference to numbers. However, I did take the liberty to correct the most obvious typos such as “ramke” (frame) instead of “rampe” (footlights).

holding daggers of sorts; then still more people came running out and proceeded to drag away the girl who had been wearing a white dress, but now had on a blue one. They did not do so at once, though, but first sang with her for a long while, and only then dragged her away, and then something metallic was struck three times in the back, and everybody got down on their knees chanting a prayer. Several times, these activities were interrupted by exultant shouts from the spectators.

Same in the third act:

But suddenly there was a storm, chromatic scales and diminished seventh chords resounded from the orchestra, and everybody ran off, again dragging one of the people present backstage, and the curtain came down.¹⁵

In the fourth act, “there was some devil who sang, waving his arms, until boards were pulled out from under him and he descended down there.”

This is also how Tolstoy described the city and the court of law in “Resurrection.” This is how he describes marriage in “The Kreutzer Sonata.” “Why, if people are soul mates, are they meant to sleep together?” But he used the device of *ostranenie* not only in order to let his readers see things he disapproved of.

Pierre rose and walked away from his new comrades, between the fires onto the other side of the street where, he was told, the captive soldiers were staying. He wished to talk to them. But on the way a French sentinel stopped him and ordered him to return. Pierre returned, but not to the fire and his comrades, but to an

¹⁵ One might wonder how the sophisticated discussion of music and the correct use of such concepts as “orchestra,” “prompter’s box,” and “theatre curtains” accord with *ostranenie*.

unharnessed carriage with no people near it. He sat down on the cold earth by the wheel of the carriage, his legs tucked under and his head bowed, and sat there immobile for a long time, thinking. More than an hour passed. Nobody disturbed Pierre. Suddenly he broke out in his thick good-natured laugh, so loudly, that the evident strangeness of this laughter made people turn and look from all directions.

Ha, ha, ha, Pierre laughed. And he began to say to himself: the soldier didn't let me through. I'm caught, I'm shut in. I. Me—my immortal soul. Ha, ha, ha, he laughed while tears came to his eyes ...

Pierre looked up at the sky, at the depth of receding sparkling stars. "All this is mine, all this is in me, all this is me," thought Pierre, "and all this, they caught and put into a barracoon, shut off with boards." He smiled and started walking toward his comrades, ready for sleep.

Anybody who knows Tolstoy well can find many hundreds of such examples in his work. This method of seeing things outside of their context led Tolstoy to the *ostranenie* of rites and dogmas in his late works, to the replacement of habitual religious terms with usual words—the result was strange, monstrous; many sincerely regarded it as sacrilegious and were deeply offended. But it was the same device that Tolstoy used elsewhere to experience and show his surroundings. Tolstoy's perception unraveled his own faith, getting to things he had been long unwilling to approach.

*

The device of *ostranenie* is not particular to Tolstoy. I described it using Tolstoy's material for purely practical reasons, because this material is familiar to everyone.

And now, having elucidated the essence of this device, let us try to delineate the limits of its use. I personally believe that *ostranenie* is present almost wherever there is an image.

Accordingly, we can formulate the difference between Potebnya's perspective and our own as follows: the image is not a constant subject with changing predicates. The goal of an image is not to bring its meaning closer to our understanding, but to create a special way of experiencing an object, to make one not "recognize" but "see" it.

The goal of imagery can be traced most clearly in erotic art.

Here, the erotic object is commonly presented as something seen for the first time. Take Gogol's "Night before Christmas":

He then came closer, coughed, chuckled, touched her full naked arm and said both slyly and smugly:

—What have you got here, then, magnificent Solokha?—Having spoken thus, he jumped back a little.

—What a question! My arm, Osip Nikiforovich!—replied Solokha.

—Hm! Your arm! Heh-heh-heh!—replied the sexton, heartily content with his opening move, and made a tour of the room.

—What have you got here, dearest Solokha!—said he, still with the same expression, approaching her again, lightly putting his hand around her neck, and then jumping back, as before.

—As if you couldn't see, Osip Nikiforovich!—replied Solokha,—my neck, and on my neck a necklace.

—Hm! A necklace on your neck! Heh-heh-heh!—and the sexton proceeded to take another tour of the room, rubbing his hands.

—What have you got here, then, incomparable Solokha ... ?—
Who knows what the sexton was about to touch this time with
those long fingers of his ...¹⁶

Or in Hamsun's *Hunger*:

“Two white marvels showed through her chemise.”

Or else, erotic objects are paraphrased, clearly not with the goal of “bringing [the reader] closer to our understanding.”

In the same vein, we find the depiction of sex organs as a lock and key, as devices for weaving (Sadovnikov 102–7, 588–91), as a bow and an arrow, or a ring and a spike, as used in a game in the epic of Staver (Rybnikov 30).

In it, the husband fails to recognize his wife who is dressed up as a warrior. She poses him a riddle:

“D’you remember, Staver, can you not recall
How we went into the street, we little ones,
How we played the game of spikes in the open street,
And you had a silver spike, and I a gilded ring?
And I hit the ring only now and then,
But you hit the ring every single time.”

Staver, Godin’s son, gives a strict reply:
“I have never played rings and spikes with you!”
Vasilisa, daughter of Mikula,
speaks again to ask him and challenge him:
“D’you remember, Staver, can you not recall
How we learned to write, me and you the same,
And I had a silver inkwell, you a gilded quill?”

¹⁶ It could be argued that neither the reader nor the protagonist experience *ostranenie* here. Rather, the latter coyly pretends to experience it, putting the “sex” in “sexton.”

And I dipped the quill only now and then,
But you dipped the quill every single time.”¹⁷

Another version of the epic provided a solution:

Then the fearsome ambassador Vasily
Raised his clothes up, raised them all the way.
And the young Staver, Staver Godin’s son,
Recognized the familiar gilded ring.

But *ostranenie* is not only used in euphemistic erotic riddles, it is also the basis and the only sense of all riddles. Every riddle describes an object with words which define and depict it but are not usually used in reference to it (“two stings, two rings, a nail in the middle” for scissors), or else it is a kind of *ostranenie* through sound, a parroting parody—“tloor and teiling” instead of “floor and ceiling” etc.

Erotic images which are not riddles are still examples of *ostranenie*, such as all cabaret “maces,” “aeroplanes,” “little dolls,” “little brothers” etc.

They have much in common with the folk image of trampled grass and broken viburnum bushes.¹⁸

The device of *ostranenie* clearly appears in another wide-spread image—the motif of the erotic pose, in which a bear or another animal (or the devil, as another motivation for non-recognition)

¹⁷ Sic; the fact that the sexual imagery seems somewhat confused here (with “Vasily” “hitting the ring”) is not a matter of translation. Arguably, the less-than-obvious meaning of “now and then” versus “every time” makes the image more difficult to process and therefore more attractive to Shklovsky.

¹⁸ It could be argued that these traditional images are the very opposite of *ostranenie*: after all, they are so familiar that the reference to sexuality is immediately “recognized,” not “seen.” “Trampled grass” is obvious enough; red viburnum berries (“kalinka,” as in the song “Kalinka-Malinka”) refer to defloration in Russian folklore. On the other hand, when used—or heard—for the first time, such an image can indeed be estranging.

fails to recognize a human. This is how the non-recognition, the strangeness of this pose, is presented in a Belorussian fairy tale (Romanov 344):

He then led his wife to the bathhouse, and, before having quite reached the steam room, spoke: “Now, wife of mine, take off all your clothes and remain as naked as your mother bore you!” “How can I strip naked before we reach the steam room?” “Well, you have to!” So she shames him: how can she strip naked before they reach the steam room? But he says: “If you don’t, you’ll be a widow, and I’ll kick the bucket.” So the wife undressed, let her hair loose and went down on her hands and knees; he sat down on top of her, facing her behind. The door was opened. The devils looked: who is he riding? He said: “Look here, you devils—if you can tell who I’m riding, I’m yours; and if not, get out of here, all of you!” And he slapped [his wife’s] behind. They walked around and around—and couldn’t guess. They could tell there was a tail—but what was that other thing? “Well, that’s a piece of work, you dear; we’ll give you whatever you want, and we’ll stay away from here!”

Very typical is non-recognition in the following fairy tale (Zelenin N70):

A peasant was plowing his field with a piebald mare. A bear came to him and asked: “uncle, who has made this mare piebald for you?” “I myself.” “But how?” “Shall I make you piebald, too?” The bear agreed. The peasant tied up his legs, took the ploughshare, heated it in the fire and went on to apply it to the bear’s flanks: the hot ploughshare scorched off his fur right to his flesh, making him piebald. He untied the bear, and the bear went away to lie under a tree. A magpie came down and wanted to peck at some meat on the peasant’s field. The peasant caught it and broke its leg. The magpie

flew away and alighted on the tree under which the bear was lying. Then, after the magpie, a spider (a big fly)¹⁹ flew onto the peasant's field and began biting the mare. The peasant took the spider, shoved a stick up its bum, and let it go. The spider flew off to the tree where the magpie and the bear were. So there they were, all three of them. The man's wife came to the field, bringing him lunch. The husband and his wife had their lunch in the fresh air, and then he toppled her onto the ground. The bear saw this and said to the magpie and the spider: "oh my! He's about to make someone piebald again." The magpie said: "no, he's about to break someone's leg." And the spider: "no, he wants to put a stick up someone's bum."

This device is identical to the one used in "Strider": this, I believe, is obvious to everyone.²⁰

Ostranenie of the act itself is very frequent in literature. Decameron is an example: "the scraping of the barrel," "the catching of the nightingale," "the merry wool-beating work" (the latter image is not developed into a plot line). Sexual organs are estranged just as frequently.

A whole series of plots is based on their "non-recognition." Afanasyev's fairy tales such as "The Bashful Lady" provide examples:

¹⁹ Sic; all original absurdities are preserved. The word *pauk* (spider) is rendered as "fly" in both published translations. The addition of "a big fly" in brackets refers to a somewhat more plausible version of the tale. Still, penetrating an insect with a stick is a feat worthy of Leskov's "Lefty," the master who horseshoed a fly.

²⁰ It does not actually seem that obvious how the depiction of human society from an alien perspective is "identical" to the punchline of a joke in which sexual intercourse is mistaken for violence (the acts of laying bare the skin on someone's flanks, putting their legs at an angle and sticking a lengthy object into their lower parts are united in a denouement which each animal associates with his own misadventure). Though animal perspectives are employed in both cases, it is doubtful whether the bawdy tale leads the reader (or, originally, listener) to perceive the strangeness of sex as intensely as Tolstoy's readers might perceive the strangeness of society. The device—showing something familiar as unfamiliar—is indeed arguably identical; the effect isn't.

the whole tale consists of not naming the object,²¹ of pretending not to recognize it. Same in his “The Bear and the Hare.” The Bear and the Hare mend “a wound.” Same in Onchukov’s “A Woman’s Blemish.”

Constructions such as “the pestle and the mortar” or “the devil and hell” (*Decameron*) are also devices of *ostranenie*.

Ostranenie in psychological parallelism is discussed in my article on plot formation.

Here, let me repeat that, in a parallelism, the sense of non-identity despite affinity is crucial.

The goal of parallelism—the goal of all imagery—is transferring an object from its usual sphere of experience to a new one, a kind of semantic change.

When studying poetic language—be it phonetically or lexically, syntactically or semantically—we always encounter the same characteristic of art: it is created with the explicit purpose of de-automatizing perception. Vision is the artist’s goal; the artistic [object] is “artificially” created in such a way that perception lingers and reaches its greatest strength and length, so that the thing is experienced not spatially but, as it were, continually.²² “Poetic language” meets these conditions. According to Aristotle, “poetic language” must have the character of the foreign, the surprising.²³ It often is quite literally a foreign language—Sumerian for Assyrians, Old Bulgarian as the basis of literary Russian—or else, it might be elevated language, like the almost literary language of folk songs. Here, we can also name

²¹ Shklovsky applied this device to romantic love rather than sexuality in his novel *Zoo, or Letters not about Love*. By attempting to refrain from talking about love, the narrator does nothing but talk about love.

²² The somewhat puzzling opposition of space and continuity is reminiscent of a state Shklovsky would later ascribe to his toddler son: “He doesn’t walk yet: he runs. His life is still continuous. It doesn’t consist of single drops. It’s experienced as a whole” (Shklovsky, *Tretya Fabrika* 134).

²³ Shklovsky appears to be referring to the concept of *xenikón* (Aristotle XXII).

the widespread use of archaisms in poetic language, the difficulties of the *dolce stil nuovo* (XII), Arnaut Daniel's dark style, and hard forms which presuppose pronunciation difficulties (Diez 213). Yakubinsky in his article proved the law of phonetic difficulty in poetic language, using the example of sound repetition.²⁴ The language of poetry is difficult, laborious language, which puts the brakes on perception. In some particular cases the language of poetry approaches the language of prose, but this does not violate the law of difficulty. Pushkin wrote:

Tatyana was her name ... I own it,
self-willed it may be just the same;
but it's the first time you'll have known it,
a novel graced with such a name.

(translation by Charles H. Johnston)²⁵

For Pushkin's contemporaries, Derzhavin's elevated diction was the usual language of poetry, so that Pushkin's style was unexpectedly difficult for them in its triviality. Recall that Pushkin's contemporaries were horrified by his vulgar expressions. Pushkin used the vernacular as a device to arrest attention, just as his contemporaries used *Russian* words in their everyday French speech (for examples, see Tolstoy's *War and Peace*).

Today, an even more characteristic phenomenon takes place. Russian literary language, originally alien to Russia, has penetrated into the human masses so deeply as to level many dialectical varieties. Literature, meanwhile, began to care for dialects (Remizov, Klyuev,

²⁴ Expressions such as "proved the law" are worth noticing, being typical of the young formalist.

²⁵ This version was chosen from the many English translations of *Eugene Onegin*, as in this particular stanza it arguably mirrors best the original light tone and playful rhyming—features crucial to this example. Tatyana was a "simple" name, not considered elegant enough for poetry—just as Pushkin's style itself was too colloquial for his time.

Esenin, and others, unequal in talent but close in their intentionally provincial language) and barbarisms (which made Severyanin's school possible). Maxim Gorky, too, is making a transition from literary language to dialect, not any less literary, in the manner of Leskov.²⁶ In this way, folk language and literary language have changed places (cf. Vyacheslav Ivanov and many others). Moreover, there is a strong tendency to create new language specifically intended for poetry; as we know, Vladimir²⁷ Khlebnikov is leading this school. Thus, we arrive at a definition of poetry as decelerated, contorted speech. Poetic speech is constructed speech. Prose, on the other hand, is ordinary speech: economical, easy, correct (*dea prosae* is the goddess of correct, easy birth, of the baby's "straight" position). I will speak in more detail about deceleration and delay as a general *law* of art in my article on plot construction.

In regard to rhythm, the position of people who believe economy to be a driving and even defining force in poetry seems strong at first sight. Spencer's interpretation of the role of rhythm seems incontestable: "Irregular blows force us to keep our muscles in excessive, sometimes unnecessary tension as we cannot foresee the repetition of the blow; regular blows help us economize energy."²⁸ This seemingly

²⁶ In Russian, *barbarizmy* refer exclusively to the use of foreign words or calqued expressions (of which Severyanin was particularly fond). Shklovsky uses the word *govor* (idiom, dialect); however, as he talks not of authentic dialect but of its literary imitation, he appears to be anticipating the concept of *skaz* (Eikhenbaum, "Kak sdelana 'Shinel' Gogolya") which describes the literary approximation of "folksy" speech.

²⁷ Khlebnikov's real name was Viktor, but he began calling himself Velimir in 1909. Shklovsky's slip of the pen (or tongue, as he dictated the text) might be connected to Khlebnikov's patronymic: his father's name was indeed Vladimir.

²⁸ Shklovsky is quoting an abbreviated paraphrase of Herbert Spencer's *The Philosophy of Style* (Veselovsky, *Sobraniye sochineniy* 445). The original is as follows: "Just as the body, in receiving a series of varying concussions, must keep the muscles ready to meet the most violent of them, as not knowing when such may come; so, the mind in receiving unarranged articulations, must keep its perpectives active enough to recognize the least easily caught sounds. And as, if the concussions recur in definite order, the body may husband its forces

convincing observation suffers from the usual fallacy—the confusion of the laws of poetic and prosaic language. In *The Philosophy of Style*, Spencer made no distinction between them, though there might well be two kinds of rhythm. The rhythm of prose, of a work song like “Dubinushka,” can replace a command;²⁹ it also simplifies work by automatizing it. It really is easier to walk with music than without it, but it’s just as easy to walk while engaged in animated conversation, when the act of walking vanishes from our consciousness. Therefore, prosaic rhythm is important as an automatizing factor. The rhythm of poetry is different. There is “order” in art, but not a single column of a Greek temple corresponds to it exactly; poetic rhythm consists in the distortion of prosaic rhythm. Attempts to systematize such distortions have been made; they are the current task of the theory of rhythm. It seems probable that such systematization will not succeed, for we are talking not of complicating but of disrupting the rhythm, of disrupting it unpredictably; if such a disruption is canonized, it will lose its power as a device of deceleration. But I will not discuss rhythm in more detail; a separate book will be dedicated to the topic.³⁰

by adjusting the resistance needful for each concussion; so, if the syllables be rhythmically arranged, the mind may economize its energies by anticipating the attention required for each syllable” (Spencer 51).

²⁹ The song’s refrain can be very roughly translated as “Move it!”; it was used as a signal for strenuous collective actions. “Dubinushka” is similar to such work songs as sea shanties and African-American call-and-response songs.

³⁰ Shklovsky never came around to writing that book.



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