

Defamiliarization: Perception as an Aesthetic End:With Reference to John Donne

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Abstract:

This study examines John Donne's style in relation to Victor Shklovsky's(1893–1984) notion of 'defamiliarization' and how this process of defamiliarization appropriately has a certain level of technical difficulty, and whether art, through this process, allows one to understand an objective. The approach to this study relies on selecting a classic and then reinterpreting it by a novel trend. The study will discuss some of the most representative of Donne's poems which manifest these stylistic maneuvers especially the conceit and other figures of speech that work as defamiliarizing agents. . Literary texts exhibit significant deviations from non-literary prose, both at the local level of phonemics and grammar, and at the global level of organization and structure. To examine these stylistic deviations and account for their psychological effects, defamiliarization is regarded as a phenomenon that is central to literary experience: it is the hallmark of literariness. Briefly, by defamiliarization one means a process during which a reader uses prototypic concepts in a context where their referents are rendered unfamiliar by various stylistic devices; the reader is required to reinterpret such referents in non-prototypic ways, or even to relocate them in a new perspective that must be created during reading.

ملخص

يقوم البحث بتشخيص أسلوب جون دن في ضوء مفهوم "الانزياح" ليفكتور شكولوفسكي وكيف أن عملية الانزياح هذه تمتلك مستوى من الصعوبة التقنية وسواء كان الفن من خلال هذه العملية يسمح لأحدنا فهم غرض ما. تعتمد المقارنة في هذا البحث على اختيار أنموذج كلاسيكي وإعادة قراءتها في ضوء تيار جديد. سنتناول الدراسة بعضا من قصائد جون دن والتي تظهر استعمال هذه الأساليب من المجاز وغيرها لاسيما الاستعارة الميتافيزيقية كعوامل انزياح. تمتاز النصوص الأدبية بانحرافات ذات أهمية من النثر غير الفني سواء أكان ذلك على مستوى الصوت والنحو أو على المستوى الكلي للهيئة والتنظيم. وللوقوف على تلك الانحرافات الأسلوبية وتبرير آثارها النفسية يكون الانزياح ظاهرة مركزية للتجربة الأدبية. إن المقصود بالانزياح وباختصار هو العملية التي يستخدم القارئ من خلالها مفاهيم أصلية في سياق تؤول فيه المرجعيات على أنها غريبة عن طريق وسائل أسلوبية متنوعة وعلى القارئ تأويلها بطريقة مغايرة.

1.1. Defamiliarization: A Historical Background

Defamiliarization theory may originally be found in the Romantic period, especially in Coleridge's (1817/1983) proposal that the purpose of literature is to overcome *the automatic nature of normal, everyday perception*⁽¹⁾. One aim of the poetry that he and Wordsworth wrote, he said, was:

to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand. (2)

The term defamiliarization is coined by the famous literary school of criticism known as Russian Formalism which includes the work of a number of highly influential Russian and Soviet scholars (Viktor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynianov, Boris Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Grigory Vinokur) who revolutionized literary criticism between 1914 and the 1930s by establishing the specificity and autonomy of poetic language and literature. Victor Shklovsky, the leader of the Russian Formalists, coined the term in 1917 in his essay "Art as Technique." The Russian word for defamiliarization is Ostraneniye which literally means "making strange". Shklovsky developed his notion of defamiliarization as a critical formula that would define the difference between literature and non-literature more precisely and more generally than had been done, and that would at the same time state the purpose of literature. Shklovsky holds that, the habitual way of thinking is to make the unfamiliar as easily digestible as possible.

Normally our perceptions are automatic because we are not challenged to see beyond the normal scope of the superficial reality around us. Shklovsky contends that when reading ordinary prose, we are likely to feel that something is wrong if we find ourselves noticing the individual words are words.⁽³⁾

With this in mind, we can define defamiliarization techniques as those which are designed to disturb our sense of normality and can roughly awaken us to new reality that may have elements of horror as well as elements of enlightenment. Writers defamiliarize form and content in different ways for many different reasons Tolstoy achieves the sensation of life by making "the familiar seem strange...for example, in "Shame" Tolstoy defamiliarizes the idea of flogging in this way: to strip people who have broken the law, to hurl them to the floor, and to rap their bottoms with switches...to lash about on the naked bottoms. Others like Laurence Sterne in Tristram Shandy "bare the technique."⁽⁴⁾ , as an end in itself According to Shklovsky, only through defamiliarization may one

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achieve the understanding of the true art. Artistic perception for Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists boils down to the idea provoking and prolonging awareness.

The purpose of art, according to Shklovsky, is to force us to notice. Since reception is usually too automatic, art develops a variety of techniques to impede perception or, at least, to call attention to themselves. Thus "Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object"⁽⁵⁾

Shklovsky's emphasis on the technical devices which create awareness becomes the focus of his artistic theory because it is the presence of the devices themselves that distinguish art from non-art. Also, the devices perform a dual function of bearing meaning as well as "forcing an awareness of its meaning upon the reader."⁽⁶⁾ Shklovsky carries his esteem for aesthetic enlightenment a step further by endorsing art as not only a high level of awareness but a perception that is an end in itself, because the good life from his point of view is the life of a man fully aware of the world. From this description, one can grasp that defamiliarization is the effect produced by art which produces a type of epiphany through the heightened sensitivity which it engenders. Hence, we see that the Russian concept of defamiliarization triggers an inner awareness of aesthetic beauty.

One major goal of goal of this paper is to probe into Metaphysical conceit employed by Donne in representative poems and it promotes defamiliarization effects which I argue his poems contain. Shklovsky's definition of defamiliarization gives examples of linguistic devices and roughened rhythm which impedes the reader's automatic perception, but leaves the methodology open to the flexibility of the imagination.

Shklovsky argues that different techniques serve a single function and that no single technique is all important.

The chief technique for promoting such perception is "defamiliarization." It is no so much a device as a result obtainable by any number of devices. A novel point of view, as Shklovsky points out, can make a reader perceive by making the familiar seem strange. Wordplay, deliberately roughened rhythm, or figures of speech can all have the same effect. No single device, then, is essential to poetry. Poetry is recognized not by the presence of a certain kind of content or images, ambiguities, symbols, or whatever, but by its ability to make man look with an exceptionally high degree of awareness.⁽⁷⁾

For the reasons stated above the Russian Formalists discuss many diverse literary devices, such as negative parallelism, comparison, repetition, balanced structure, hyperbole, words, and sounds, because all these devices can be used to solicit a subjective response. Thus the way to obtain the defamiliarization effect is not bound to any one concretized formula, because to do so would be to restrict the individual and thereby limit the originality of perceptions that the effect can produce.

In his discussion of defamiliarization, Shklovsky distinguishes between prose perception and poetry perception. According to his delineation, prose perception is achieved in the reader when his responses become automatic or habitual due to the fact that the reader's responses are dictated from the unconscious. "due to this intense automation, things are replaced by symbols and in the spoken language, sounds become elliptical. In this process objects and sounds are not perceived in their entirety, but recognized by their main characteristics."⁽⁸⁾ Thus Shklovsky's concerns are that the means of communication are inhibited because they are becoming fossilized or forced into the unconscious instead of evoking vivid, genuine and meaningful responses or receptions. Artistic perceptions are needed to renovate prosaic expressions, thoughts, and the ideas by amplifying thought patterns, juxtaposing the new to the old, by presenting new possibilities to mankind. Although Shklovsky does not advocate any method for revealing ordinary objects in a new light, he does explain several types of defamiliarization techniques, such as parody, euphemism, the use of the naïve narrator, the use of nonsense words, disorganized rhyme, and laying bare the technique. For example, Shklovsky demonstrates that Tolstoy's descriptions in War and Peace present an object or event as if it were being seen for the first time. Shklovsky goes on to say that Tolstoy uses unusual narrators to present unorthodox points of view of something familiar. In some instances, Tolstoy

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parodies a situation or a character's behaviour by describing two incongruous places in a parallel way. "is method of seeing things out of their normal context is also apparent in his words."⁽⁹⁾ Shklovsky refers to the propensity of language in general and words in particular to become automatic formulas; and the same applies to literature which, from one point of view, may be seen in bulk as traditional commonplaces expressed in conventional forms. This inclination in language and literature to become habitualized, to settle into easy and familiar patterns, is a process which Russian and other critics have associated with the concept of entropy; however, by tearing the object out of its habitual context, by bringing together *disparate notions*, as with metaphysical poets of the 17th century, the poet gives a *coup de grace* to the verbal cliché. Therefore, he argues that, to be made new and poetically valuable, language must be defamiliarized and made strange through linguistic displacement which means that setting up language in a strange context. Thus this natural phenomenon of language is precisely what empowers the poet. The poet uses the palette of common language and mixes its colors in new and different ways so that, when the reader encounters the poetic creation, it is a color, an arrangement, never before considered. Thus the object in poetry is not important; the words do not impart a specific meaning to the art, but rather the artist's rearrangement of words is what matters. This relates directly to modernist emphasis on form over content, on structure and arrangement. Shklovsky extends this approach as the fundamental technique of poetry. Much recent criticism concerning Modernist form and allusion reference its technical difficulty as elitist or *recherché*, but such attempts at defamiliarization require some level of difficulty. If something is difficult, then that something is in a form or a connection previously unknown, something entirely new. Art should not tell us what we already know, but present to us the unknown. As Shklovsky observes: "The purpose of art is to impart the sensations of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important."⁽¹⁰⁾ What Shklovsky is driving at is properly that "the object is not important" in that the form and structure matter most, that the object itself has no one meaning (for it cannot, as words mean different things to different people), but the object's juxtaposition to the world around it, its relation to the known and to the familiar, present meaning and emotion.

Poetry defamiliarizes, and restores feelings that were blunted or decayed. A similar attitude is offered in "Art as Technique" by Victor Shklovsky. Habitualization, said Shklovsky (1917/1965), devours life. Art exists, Shklovsky continues, that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.⁽¹¹⁾ The mode of perception is equivalent to the arrangement of the art; that is, art attempts to rearrange how we perceive and not what we perceive. It may be the case that the object transforms as our conception of it transforms, but this metamorphosis derives from the new eyes that the poem gives to us. The artist gives us the eyes, not. The vision of Shklovsky is quiet clear about that. "An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it; its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object – it creates a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it."⁽¹²⁾ Once defamiliarization strips its normal meaning, still requires new meaning to be invested in it by the reader. Donne's 'conceit' requires a reader and an emotion from that reader for the object must utilize the consciousness of the audience in order to become a meaningful aesthetic experience: One would rather suggest that defamiliarization is an aspect of the reading process that is grounded in feelings. In response to stylistic devices, feelings influence a reader's departure from prototypic understandings. "Defamiliarization", as Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis observe is "not so much a device as a result obtainable by a number of devices."⁽¹³⁾ An examination of the general laws of perception will reveal that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus for instance all of human habits move back into the field of the unconsciously automatic. Literary language "has no practical function at all and simply makes us see differently."⁽¹⁴⁾ Literature differs from practical language in its special construction. Poetry is looked at by Formalists as the essentially literary use of language. In his famous essay "Art a Technique" Shklovsky argues that "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged."⁽¹⁵⁾

Defamiliarization does not reveal the world as it really is but merely constitutes one distinctive form of cognition amongst others. Literature then is also a practice of the transformation of existing forms of cognition that shape our perception of the social world.

1.2. Convention in Question

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"Metaphysical poetry" as a term came to be associated with a particular type of 17th century poetry. Originally this term was intended to be derogatory; Dryden, who said Donne "affects the metaphysics," was criticizing Donne for being too arcane. Samuel Johnson later used the term "metaphysical poetry" to portray the precise poetic technique used by poets like Donne. Metaphysical poets are generally in rebellion against the highly conventional imagery of the Elizabethan lyric for instance Donne poetry is "in contrast to the Petrarchan tradition of love-poetry" for he never attempts to "deify or idealize the objects of his passion."⁽¹⁶⁾ The poems tend to be intellectually complex, and express honestly, if unconventionally, the poet's sense of the complexities and contradictions of life. The verse is a "witty exercise."⁽¹⁷⁾ and sounds rough in comparison to the smooth conventions of other poets; Ben Jonson once said that John Donne "deserved hanging" for the way he ran roughshod over conventional rhythms. The result is that these poems often lack lyric smoothness, but they instead use a rugged irregular movement that seems to suit the content of the poems.

For an example of metaphysical rebellion against lyrical convention, one can look at Donne's Holy Sonnet 14. The sonnet is a highly conventional art form, and one would expect a smooth iambic pentameter line. But notice all the stressed syllables in the first lines of this poem, and how hard it is to read them in the conventional iambic pentameter pattern:

Batter my heart, three-personed God, for You As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend; That I may rise, and stand, oe'erthrow me, and bend Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
--

The poem is made of a pattern of irregular religious metaphors whose connotations are familiar to the ordinary Christian ear as he "weaves trinities into the formal elements of his design."⁽¹⁸⁾ But, when used by Donne, they are given a new push that makes one contemplate for a while what is being said. The meter Donne uses has an affinity with his metaphoric usage as it relates to his experimentation with metrical freedom. Both of these characteristics—the sinewy elasticity of meter and the intellectual contortion of metaphorical conceit—are attributes of the "metaphysical" style of poetry of which Donne is the preeminent representative. It is however, difficult to imagine Donne's passionate outburst being expressed in any other way, since the poet uses the irregularities imposed on the iambic pentameter model to reinforce his unusual imagery. There is, as T.S.Eliot says a "complex insight and a feeling with immediacy and surprise. It presupposes rapid thought and wide

awareness brought to bear in contrast pressure of the mind on experience."⁽¹⁹⁾ the mind inquiring more deeply into or beyond the present moment. It showed itself especially in congruities, puns, metaphors, and paradoxes. In a line from his "Nocturnall Upon St Lucie's Day", stanza 2: "For I am every dead thing". Formalist critics would discuss this line by drawing attention to the underlying iambic impulse. The reader's anticipation is frustrated by a dropped syllable between "dead" and "thing"; one perceives a deviation from the norm, and this is what produces the aesthetic significance. Poetry exercises "a controlled violence upon practical language."⁽²⁰⁾ In reading a poem by Donne as "A Valediction..." What one experiences is an "unusual analogy in that love is compared to a mathematician's tool rather than some object or process in nature."⁽²¹⁾ This type of digression from the familiar creates a kind of "slowing down of perception and a roughening of textual surface which are sufficient reason for defamiliarization."⁽²²⁾ The abrupt beginning, which is typical of this type of poetry, adds to the totality of creating a defamiliarized text; "Batter my heart" surprises the reader if it does not shock him altogether. Conventional poetry was not familiar with such "startling" beginnings for poems and how "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together"⁽²³⁾. The poet seems to have a desire to draw more attention than other poets to the writing strategy of his poems. Donne may be regarded as a forerunner of the now famous dramatic technique of the Russian defamiliarization and/or the German *Verfremdungseffect* of Bertolt Brecht because in all cases a reader is called to open his eyes and ears wide in preparation for an aesthetic experience yet to come.

1.3. Revolutionizing Imagery

Donne's poetry, as Eliot's, demands a reader well-versed in other disciplines and also is poetry of an "unchartered freedom."⁽²⁴⁾ In the words of Helen Gardner. The metaphysical poets revolutionized the conventions of imagery. Their tool for doing this was the conceit which is a poetic idea, usually a metaphor. There can be conventional ideas, where there are expected metaphors: Petrarchan conceits imitate the metaphors used by the Italian poet Petrarch. In general, the metaphysical conceit will use some sort of shocking or unusual comparison as the basis for the metaphor. When it works, a metaphysical conceit has a surprising aptness that makes us look at something in an entirely new way. This new way is what Shklovsky calls defamiliarization the aim behind it is to make the reader stop and ponder for a time to enjoy this delay in perceiving the message. The metaphysical poets made use of the available knowledge at the time e it theological, esoteric, practical, or philosophical. The conceit is witty, novel, and startling. It is different from the Petrarchan conceit which became "hackneyed in some of his imitators among Elizabethan sonneteers"⁽²⁵⁾ The classic metaphysical

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conceit is Donne's comparison of the union between two lovers to the two legs of a compass in "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning."

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two ;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Donne is probably the first and foremost Metaphysical poet who realized the aesthetic value of delaying perception by creating an intricate text not for the sake of difficulty, but because it was an attempt to do away with the old icons of flogged imagery. He mingled the scientific knowledge of his time with his poetic message and hereby created a defamiliarized text. Comparing lovers to birds could pass unnoticed for readers or probably comparing them to pet birds would get the same result but, comparing lovers to two compasses would revolutionize the traditional romantic equation. How does the reader enjoy the realization of this poetic image behind this logical maneuver? In which a flea that bites both the speaker and his lover becomes a conceit arguing for the depth of their union:

Oh stay! Three lives in one flea spare
Where we almost, yea more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage-bed and marriage temple is.

It is a dramatic lyric not a dramatic monologue because as Abrams argues the focus of interest is "primarily on the speaker's elaborately ingenious argument, rather than on the character he inadvertently reveals in the course of arguing"⁽²⁶⁾ Poetry is an end in itself because it seeks to *unhinge such assumed associations between words and the idea the words reference* rhyme

schemes, rhetorical balance, conceit, mixed metaphors...all these devices ...defamiliarize language and awaken readers to the intricacy and texture of verbal structure. The lines below bear witness to the " use of erotic imagery in religious poetry"⁽²⁷⁾

Divorce me, untie or break that knot again;
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be
free,
Now ever chaste, except you ravish me.

A typical Donne love poem is a surprising fusion and distillation of hostility, irrelevance, and discord.

Which with phantastique schemes fills full much paper;
Which hath divided heaven in tenements,
And with whores, theeves, and murderers stuff his rents
So full, that though hee passe them all in sinne,
He leaves himself no roome to enter in. (59-64)
Or were they Spanish Stamps, still travelling,
That are become as Catholique as their King,
Those unlickt beare-whelps, unfil'd pistols
That (more than Canon shot) avales or lets. (29-32)

Allusions such as these, along with the colloquial texture of the language of Donne's strong lines, would anchor the elegy firmly in the world of popular gossip and scandal of the last decade of Elizabeth's reign. Donne succeeds in evoking the atmosphere of the Roman elegy more successfully than probably any other Renaissance poet. Donne is less an imitator of particular phrases, stylistic devices, themes, or episodes of this or that poem by his ancient predecessors than a triumphant rival, who has recreated into the Roman genre and transposed it into his own late Elizabethan milieu. "The Bracelet," for example, captures the mingling of passionate desire, bitter cynicism, and wry irony that mark the classical erotic elegy without drawing on any specific classical poem.

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The scene of Donne's elegy is thus littered with elements that are "hostile," "discordant," and "irrelevant" to the conventional sense of love: it is irony that brings these antagonistic forces together in a single poetic structure. For despite the disparate elements jostling about among its lines, "The Bracelet" attains not only unity but even dramatic coherence. Whether it amuses or appalls, attracts or repels, the voice of this poem is alive and consistent with human experience, because its exasperated speaker is so credibly torn between two familiar human motivations: lust and greed. The first of these impulses is sufficiently strong that we infer that he will, however reluctantly, submit to the demand of his imperious mistress:

But, thou art resolute; Thy will be done;
Yet with such anguish, as her onely sonne
The Mother in the hungry grave doth lay,
Unto the fire these Martyrs I betray. (79–82)

The harsh flirtation with blasphemy evoked by the echo of the Our Father ("Thy will be done"), by the hyperbolic term "Martyrs," and by the hinted reference to the Blessed Virgin at the burial of Christ undercuts the familiar idealism of the Petrarchan deifying of the beloved by a mockingly excessive solemnity. The poem, linguistically speaking, draws attention to itself which is a major factor in the Formalistic approach. The angry tone of this reluctant erotic worshipper reveals that his devotion can hardly be spiritual, especially since he has already observed that his very act of appeasement will serve only to diminish her favor:

But, shall my harmlesse angels perish? Shall
I lose my guard, my ease, my food, my all?
Much hope which they should nourish will be dead.
Much of my able youth, and lusty head
Will vanish; if thou love let them alone,
For thou will love me lesse when they are gone ... (49–54)

The final irony of course is, that despite his compulsive yet reluctant yielding to a less than ideal mistress, the speaker of the poem still cannot relinquish his attachment to his "angels." The woman

disappears from the last twenty-four lines in the persona's obsessive brooding over the "wretched finder" of the bracelet:

But, I forgive; repent thee honest man:
Gold is Restorative, restore it then:
Or if with it thou beest loath to'depart,
Because `tis cordiall, would twere at thy heart. (111-
14)

Donne's love poetry is "a well wrought urn" precisely in recognizing its own heroic insufficiency against the temporal and material forces always threatening to overwhelm it. The wit and irony of Donne's poetry are very much akin to what a modern poet, Wallace Stevens, calls "nobility"⁽²⁸⁾

In conclusion, Donne is one of the poets whose poetry easily shows the mechanisms of a recent trend of criticism i.e. the Formalist trend. The poetry of John Donne has also a unique poetics of defamiliarization that is contained mainly within the major poetic device his texts reveal which is the Conceit. As long as defamiliarization holds water, there would be much credit to Donne's genius. Donne is a precursor of the techniques of defamiliarization and Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* centuries ago while the merit of brining these aspects of his poetry to the fore are ascribable to the Russian Formalist school of Criticism which emerged during the 20s of the 20th century. No where in the Metaphysical poets tradition is the technique of this school present as it is in Donne. Donne is probably the first and foremost Metaphysical poet who realized the aesthetic value of delaying perception by creating an intricate text not for the sake of difficulty, but because it was an attempt to do away with the old icons of flogged imagery.

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