

THEORY OF PROSE VIKTOR SHKLOVSKY

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vehicle deduct from its efficiency; and that in composition, the chief, if not the sole thing to be done, is to reduce this friction and inertia to the smallest possible amount. (*The Philosophy of Style*)

And Richard Avenarius writes:

If the soul possessed inexhaustible resources, then it would be of no moment to it, of course, how many of these inexhaustible resources had actually been spent. The only thing that would matter would be, perhaps, the time expended. However, since our resources are limited, we should not be surprised to find that the soul seeks to carry out its perceptual activity as purposefully as possible, i.e., with, relatively speaking, the least expenditure of energy possible or, which is the same, with, relatively speaking, the greatest result possible.

By a mere allusion to the general law governing the economy of mental effort, Petrazhitzky dismisses James's theory, in which the latter presents the case for the corporeal basis of the effect. The principle of the economy of creative effort, so seductive especially in the domain of rhythm, was affirmed by Aleksandr Veselovsky. Taking Spencer's ideas to their conclusion, he said: "The merit of a style consists precisely in this: that it delivers the greatest number of ideas in the fewest number of words." Even Andrei Bely, who, at his best, gave us so many fine examples of his own "laborious," impeding rhythm and who, citing examples from Baratynsky, pointed out the "laboriousness" of poetic epithets, found it, nonetheless, necessary to speak of the law of economy in his book. This work, representing a heroic attempt to create a theory of art, demonstrates Bely's enormous command of the devices of poetry. Unfortunately, it also rests on a body of unverified facts gathered from out-of-date books, including Krayevich's physics textbook, in fashion when he was a student at the lyc ee.

The idea that an economy of effort lies at the basis of and governs the creative process may well hold true in the "practical" domain of language. However, these ideas, flourishing in the prevailing climate of ignorance concerning the nature of poetic creation, were transplanted from their native soil in prose to poetry.

The discovery that there are sounds in the Japanese poetic language that have no parallels in everyday Japanese was perhaps the first factual indication that these two languages, that is, the poetic and the practical, do not coincide. L. P. Yakubinsky's article concerning the absence of the law of dissimilation of liquid sounds in the language of poetry, and, on the other hand, the admission into the language of poetry, as pointed out by the author, of a confluence of similar sounds that are difficult to pronounce (corroborated by scientific research), clearly point, at least in this case, to the fundamental opposition of the laws governing the practical and poetic uses of language.

For that reason we have to consider the question of energy expenditure and economy in poetry, not by analogy with prose, but on its own terms.

If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes

habitual, it also becomes automatic. So eventually all of our skills and experiences function unconsciously—automatically. If someone were to compare the sensation of holding a pen in his hand or speaking a foreign tongue for the very first time with the sensation of performing this same operation for the ten thousandth time, then he would no doubt agree with us. It is this process of automatization that explains the laws of our prose speech with its fragmentary phrases and half-articulated words.

The ideal expression of this process may be said to take place in algebra, where objects are replaced by symbols. In the rapid-fire flow of conversational speech, words are not fully articulated. The first sounds of names hardly enter our consciousness. In *Language as Art*, Pogodin tells of a boy who represented the sentence “Les montagnes de la Suisse sont belles” in the following sequence of initial letters: *L, m, d, l, S, s, b*.

This abstractive character of thought suggests not only the method of algebra but also the choice of symbols (letters and, more precisely, initial letters). By means of this algebraic method of thinking, objects are grasped spatially, in the blink of an eye. We do not see them, we merely recognize them by their primary characteristics. The object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged. We know that it exists because of its position in space, but we see only its surface. Gradually, under the influence of this generalizing perception, the object fades away. This is as true of our perception of the object in action as of mere perception itself. It is precisely this perceptual character of the prose word that explains why it often reaches our ears in fragmentary form (see the article by L. P. Yakubinsky). This fact also accounts for much discord in mankind (and for all manner of slips of the tongue). In the process of algebrizing, of automatizing the object, the greatest economy of perceptual effort takes place. Objects are represented either by one single characteristic (for example, by number), or else by a formula that never even rises to the level of consciousness. Consider the following entry in Tolstoi’s diary:

As I was walking around dusting things off in my room, I came to the sofa. For the life of me, I couldn’t recall whether I had already dusted it off or not. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious, I felt that it was already impossible to remember it. If I had in fact dusted the sofa and forgotten that I had done so, i.e., if I had acted unconsciously, then this is tantamount to not having done it at all. If someone had seen me doing this consciously, then it might have been possible to restore this in my mind. If, on the other hand, no one had been observing me or observing me only unconsciously, if the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it’s as if this life had never been. (29 February [i.e., 1 March] 1897)

And so, held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war.

If the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it’s as if this life had never been.

And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By "enstranging" objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious." The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant.*

The life of a poem (and of an artifact) proceeds from vision to recognition, from poetry to prose, from the concrete to the general, from Don Quixote, the scholarly and poor aristocrat enduring half-consciously his humiliation at court, to Turgenev's broad and hollow Don Quixote, from Charlemagne to Charles the Fat. As the work of art dies, it becomes broader: the fable is more symbolic than a poem and a proverb is more symbolic than a fable. For that reason, Potebnya's theory is least self-contradictory in its analysis of the fable, which, he believed, he had investigated thoroughly. Alas, his theory never dealt with the "eternal" works of imaginative literature. That accounts for the fact that Potebnya never did complete his book. As is well known, *Notes on the Theory of Literature* was published in 1905, thirteen years after the author's death. Potebnya himself had managed to work out fully only the section on the fable.

After being perceived several times, objects acquire the status of "recognition." An object appears before us. We know it's there but we do not see it, and, for that reason, we can say nothing about it. The removal of this object from the sphere of automatized perception is accomplished in art by a variety of means. I wish to point out in this chapter one of the devices used almost constantly by Tolstoi. It is Merezhkovsky's belief that Tolstoi presents things as he sees them with his eyes without ever changing them.

The devices by which Tolstoi enstranges his material may be boiled down to the following: he does not call a thing by its name, that is, he describes it as if it were perceived for the first time, while an incident is described as if it were happening for the first time. In addition, he foregoes the conventional names of the various parts of a thing, replacing them instead with the names of corresponding parts in other things. Let me demonstrate this with an example. In "Shame" Tolstoi enstranges the idea of flogging by describing people who, as punishment for violating the law, had been stripped, thrown down on the floor, and beaten with switches. A few lines later he refers to the practice of whipping their behinds. In a note on this passage, Tolstoi asks: "Just why this stupid, savage method of inflicting pain and no other: such as pricking the shoulder or some such other part of the body with needles, squeezing somebody's hands or feet in a vise, etc."

I apologize for the harshness of this example but it is typical of the way Tolstoi reaches our conscience. The usual method of flogging is enstranged by a description that changes its form without changing its essence. Tolstoi constantly makes use of this method of enstrangement.

In "Kholstomer," where the story is told from the point of view of a horse, the objects are estranged not by our perception but by that of the horse. Here is how the horse views the institution of property:

What they were saying about flogging and about Christianity I understood very well. But I was completely mystified by the meaning of the phrase "my colt" or "his colt." I could see that humans presupposed a special relationship between me and the stable. What the nature of that relationship was I could not fathom at the time. Only much later, when I was separated from the other horses, did I understand what all this meant. At that time, however, I couldn't possibly understand what it meant when I heard myself called by people as the property of a human being. The words "my horse" referred to me, a living horse, and this seemed to me just as strange as the words "my land," "my air" or "my water."

And yet, these words had an enormous impact on me. I thought about this night and day, and it was only after many diverse contacts with humans that I learned at last the significance of these strange words. The gist is this: People are guided in their life not by deeds but by words. They love not so much the opportunity of doing (or not doing) something as the chance to talk about a host of things in the possessive language so customary among them: *my* book, *my* house, *my* land, etc. I saw that they applied this "my" to a whole gamut of things, creatures and objects, in fact, even to people, to horses, to the earth itself. They have made a compact among themselves that only one person shall say "my" to any one thing. And, in accordance with the rules of this game, he who could say "my" about the greatest number of things would be considered to be the happiest of men. Why this is so I don't know, but it is so. For a long time I tried to see in this some direct benefit to me, but in the final analysis, it all seemed so unjust.

Many of the people, for example, who call me their horse did not ride on me. Others did. These same people never fed me. Others did. Once again, I was shown many kindnesses, but not by those who called me their horse. No, by coachmen, veterinarians and strangers of all sorts. As my observations grew, though, I became increasingly convinced that this concept of *mine* was invalid not only for us horses but also for human folk, i.e., that it represents nothing more than man's base and beastly instinct to claim property for himself. A landlord, for instance, says "my house" but never lives in it, concerning himself only with the structure and maintenance of the house. A merchant says "my shop," "my clothing shop," yet he himself does not wear any clothes made from the fine material displayed in it.

There are people who call a piece of land theirs but have never laid eyes on it nor walked it. There are people who call other people theirs, but who have never seen them. And their entire contact with these people consists of doing them evil.

There are people who call women "theirs" or "their" wives, yet these women live with other men. And people do not aspire to do good. No, they dream of naming as many objects as possible as *their own*.

Leaving aside other good reasons for our superiority, I am now convinced that what distinguishes us from humans and gives us the right to claim a higher place on the ladder of living creatures is simply this: that the human species is guided, above all, by *words*, while ours is guided by *deeds*.

The horse is killed off long before the end of the story, but the mode of telling the story, its device, does not change:

Much later, they dumped Serpukhovsky's body into the ground. He had walked the earth. He had drunk and eaten of it. Neither his skin nor flesh nor bones were of any use to anybody.

For twenty years, this dead body walking the earth was a great burden to everyone. Now, the dumping of this body seemed like another hardship to others. He was no longer of any use to anyone and could no longer cause anyone any grief. Nevertheless, the dying who buried the dead had found it necessary to dress up this bloated body, which was about to rot, in a dress uniform and to lower him, with his good boots on, into a fine coffin adorned with new tassels at the four corners. They then put this new coffin into another coffin made of lead, took it to Moscow, where they dug up ancient human bones and buried this body infested with worms in its new uniform and polished boots. Then they poured earth all over his coffin.

We see by the end of this story that Tolstoi continues to make use of this device even when no motivation for it exists.

In *War and Peace* Tolstoi describes battles using the same device. They are all presented, above all, in their strangeness. Unfortunately, I cannot offer any full examples, because this would require excerpting a large portion of the monumental novel. However, a description of the salons and the theater will suffice for the moment:

Level boards were spread out in the center of the stage. Along the wings stood painted pictures depicting trees. Behind them, a canvas was stretched on boards. In the middle of the stage sat young girls in red bodices and white skirts. One young girl, very fat, and attired in white silk, was sitting separately on a low bench to which a green cardboard was attached from behind. They were all singing something. When they finished singing, the young girl in white walked over to the prompter's box and a man in tight-fitting silken hose on his fat legs approached her, sporting a plume, spread his arms in despair and began singing. The man in tight-fitting hose sang alone, then she sang. Then they both fell silent, the music roared, and the man began fingering the hand of the young girl dressed in white, evidently waiting again for his turn to join her in song. After their duet, everyone in the theater applauded and shouted. Gesticulating, the lovers then smiled and bowed to the audience.

The second act included scenes depicting monuments. The moon and stars peeped in through holes in the canvas and lampshades were raised in frames. Then, to the sound of bass horns and double basses, hordes of men rushed onto the stage sporting black mantles and brandishing what looked like daggers. Then still others ran up and started pulling on the arm of a young girl. Dressed earlier in white, she was now dressed in a light blue dress. They did not drag her off right away. First, they joined her in a song for what seemed like a very long time. At long last, after whisking her off, they struck three times on some metallic object offstage. Then, everyone fell on his knees and began singing a prayer. Several times the actions of the protagonists were interrupted by the enthusiastic screams of the audience.

So also in the third act:

... But suddenly a storm broke out and in the orchestra you could hear the chromatic scales and diminished seventh chords and they all ran up and dragged another of the characters offstage as the curtain fell.

Or in the fourth act:

There was a certain devil on the stage who sang, with arms outspread, until someone pulled the board from under him and he fell through.

Tolstoi describes the city and court in *Resurrection* in the same way. Similarly, he asks of the marriage in *The Kreutzer Sonata*: "Why should two people who are soul mates sleep together?"

But the device of enstrangement was not used by Tolstoi to enstrange only those things he scorned:

Pierre got up and walked away from his new friends and made his way among camp fires to the other side of the road where, as he had been told, the captive soldiers stayed. He wanted to have a little talk with them. On the way, a French sentinel stopped him and ordered him to return. Pierre returned, but not to the camp fire, not to his friends, but to an unharnessed carriage that stood somewhat apart. Cross-legged and with his head lowered, he sat on the cold earth by the wheels of the carriage and thought for a long time without moving. More than an hour passed. No one disturbed him. Suddenly, Pierre broke out with a robust, good-natured laugh that was so loud that people looked back from all directions at this evidently strange laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha," Pierre laughed and he began talking to himself: "So the soldier wouldn't let me through, ha, ha, ha! They seized me, blocked my way. Me. Me. My immortal soul. Ha, ha, ha," he continued laughing as tears rolled down his cheeks. . . .

Pierre looked up at the sky, at the playful stars that were receding into the distance. "And all of this is mine and all of this is within me and all of this is me," Pierre thought to himself. "And they seized all of this and shut it off with boards." He smiled, returned to his comrades and went to sleep.

Everyone who knows Tolstoi well can find several hundred examples of this sort. His way of seeing things out of their usual context is equally evident in his last works, where he applies the device of enstrangement to his description of the dogmas and rituals he had been investigating. He replaces the customary terms used by the Orthodox Church with ordinary, down-to-earth words. What results is something strange, something monstrous which was taken by many—quite sincerely, I might add—as a form of blasphemy, causing them great pain. And yet this is the same device that Tolstoi applied to his perceptions and descriptions of the world around him.

Tolstoi's faith was shattered by his perceptions. He was confronting that which he had been trying to evade for a long time.

The device of enstrangement is not peculiar to Tolstoi. I illustrated it with examples from his work for purely practical considerations, that is, simply because his work is known to everyone.

Having delineated this literary device, let us now determine the limits of its application more precisely. In my opinion, enstrangement can be found almost anywhere (i.e., wherever there is an image).

What distinguishes our point of view from that of Potebnya may be

formulated as follows: The image is not a constant subject for changing predicates. The purpose of the image is not to draw our understanding closer to that which this image stands for, but rather to allow us to perceive the object in a special way, in short, to lead us to a "vision" of this object rather than mere "recognition."

The purpose of imagery may be most clearly followed in erotic art. The erotic object is here commonly presented as something seen for the very first time. Consider, for example, Gogol's "Christmas Eve":

Then he moved closer to her, coughed, let out a laugh, touched her exposed, full arm and said in a voice that expressed both cunning and self-satisfaction.

"And what's that you have there, my splendid Solokha?" Saying this, he took several steps back.

"What do you mean? My arm, Osip Nikiforovich!" Solokha answered.

"Hm! Your arm! Heh, heh, heh!" the secretary, satisfied with his opening gambit, said warmly and paced about the room.

"And what's that you have there, Solokha? Why are you trembling?" he said with that same look in his eyes as he started for her again and touched her neck lightly with his hand. He then pulled back as before.

"As if you didn't see, Osip Nikiforovich!" Solokha answered. "It's my neck and on my neck there is a necklace."

"Hm! So there is a necklace on your neck! Heh, heh, heh!" and the secretary again paced up and down the room, wringing his hands. "And what's that you have there, my peerless Solokha?"

Who knows how far the secretary would dare go with those long fingers of his?

Or in Hamsun's *Hunger*: "Two white miracles showed through her blouse."

Or else erotic objects are depicted allegorically, where the author's intent is clearly something quite other than a conceptual understanding.

Here belongs the description of private parts in the form of a lock and key (e.g., in Savodnikov's *Riddles of the Russian People*), or in the corresponding parts of a loom, or in the form of a bow and arrow, or in the game of rings and marlinespikes. We find the latter in the traditional bylina (folk epic) about Stavyor, where the husband fails to recognize his wife, who has put on the armor of a bogatyr (folk) heroine. She poses the following riddle:

"Do you remember, Stavyor, remember, dear?
 How we strolled along the street when young,
 How we played rings and 'spikes together:
 Your marlinespike was made of silver,
 While my ring was made of gold.
 I would hit the target now and then
 But you struck bull's-eye every time . . ."
 Stavyor, son of Godinovich, says in turn:
 "I have never played marlinespikes with you!"
 Vasilisa Mikulichna fires back, quote:
 "Don't you remember, Stavyor, don't you recall