

HAIKU AND DEFAMILIARIZATION

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In a 2015 essay, with the lengthy title “Newku for Old? *Haiku 21* and *Haiku 2014* as Guides to the Experimental and Traditional in Haiku (With an Extended Digression on Richard Gilbert’s *The Disjunctive Dragonfly*),” Lee Gurga identifies and discusses some key features of haiku, features that the poems in his and Scott Metz’s anthologies, *Haiku 21* and *Haiku 2014*, share. Gurga contends that “notable” contemporary haiku, including the ones in their anthologies, “take defining concepts traditionally associated with haiku”—the features that Gurga details in his essay—“and reinterpret them with a twist.”¹

At one point in this discussion, where he highlights how extreme and radical this interpretive “twist” can sometimes be, Gurga makes passing reference to Victor Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarization, which Shklovsky introduces in “Art as Technique.” Gurga goes so far as to quote a portion of the core of Shklovsky’s argument, which, in full, reads as follows:

And art exists 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. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*²

What I intend to do in what follows is fully pursue the topic Gurga introduces: Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarization and its application to the understanding of haiku. More specifically, I will examine in detail the implications of Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarization, not only as he develops it in “Art as Technique” but in another key essay as well, and situate that concept in the context of the theoretical movement that spawned it,

Russian Formalism. I will then explore ways in which haiku are especially equipped to defamiliarize—in the robust sense that Shklovsky intends the term—reality. I hope to show that not only can Shklovsky’s complex concept be used as a tool for interpreting individual haiku, for ferreting out their subtlest shades of meaning, but also, and perhaps more significantly, it can serve as an instrument for identifying things haiku can do that other longer literary genres cannot.

II

Russian Formalism, Ann Jefferson notes, began in 1914, with the publication of Shklovsky’s essay “The Resurrection of the Word,” and ended, due to political pressures, in 1930.³ The movement consisted of two distinct branches, the Opayaz group and the Moscow Linguistic Circle. The Muscovites were interested primarily in applying linguistics to the study of poetic language. Their most famous member was the linguist Roman Jakobson. The Opayaz group, whose full title was Society for the Study of Poetic Language, focused on reorienting literary criticism as it was generally practiced in Russia at the time. In addition to its leader and best known member, Victor Shklovsky, the group counted as participants and contributors the distinguished theorists Boris Eikenbaum, Osip Brik, and Yury Tynyanov.

As Uri Margolin points out, “Russian Formalism was never a school with a uniform doctrine whether theoretical, historical, or methodological.”⁴ Instead, it “was a constantly evolving and changing enterprise in which concepts, hypotheses, and models were formulated, intensely discussed, and modified or replaced as soon as inadequacies were discovered or questions arose...” There is, however, one tenet of the movement, especially in its early phase, that is central, that is shared in one form or another by almost all Russian Formalists: what makes literature uniquely literature is its special use of language, how it communicates. That is to say, Russian Formalists valued form over raw content; they saw their task as the analysis of literary devices. As Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker note, “[t]he first Russian Formalists ... considered human ‘content’ (emotions, ideas, and ‘reality’ in general) possessed no literary significance in itself, but merely provided a context for the functioning of literary

‘devices.’”⁵ And Terry Eagleton writes: “[f]ar from seeing form as the expression of content, they [the Russian Formalists] stood the relationship on its head: content was merely ‘motivation’ of form, an occasion or convenience for a particular kind of formal exercise.”⁶

On the one hand, far from privileging the medium over the message, Shklovsky, in the key passage from “Art as Technique” quoted above, would appear to be stressing the centrality of *what* a text communicates, its content. He calls attention to the fact that art is about “things,” “objects,” “life.” Through literature—the form of art with which Shklovsky is principally concerned—we “recover the sensation of life,” he says. Art causes us to “feel things”; it “make[s] objects ‘unfamiliar.’” The stone is made “*stonny*,” he insists. Literature’s chief value, Shklovsky seems to imply, is that it fully reveals reality, enables us to truly sense and perceive it. Literary texts, as well as other forms of art, are not mere formal exercises but rather ways of getting at the objective world.

Shklovsky further explains elsewhere in “Art as Technique” that “[i]f we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual it becomes automatic.”⁷ Automatic, habitual perception constitutes an “‘algebraic’ method of thought” through which “we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics.” What literature, as well as the other arts, does is dehabituate, renew our way of seeing things. In Shklovsky’s words, art “removes objects from the automatism of perception...” The literary text, Shklovsky is apparently suggesting, enables us to perceive reality in all its factual, actual complexity. What he seems to have in mind, then, when he makes such claims as art “impart[s] the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” is that it allows us to see and feel into the depths of the objective world; rather than view things, as we normally do, in a superficial, non-reflective, familiar manner (as they are habitually “known”), we see them in the literary text as they really are, in all their nuanced facticity (as those things are truly “perceived”). Thus, in claiming that art “make[s] the stone *stonny*,” Shklovsky seemingly means that the work of art renders visible the true stoniness—the inherent essence—of the stone.

But, of course, Shklovsky also claims—with the emphasis italics provides—that “*the object is not important.*” What is important, what we get from the work of art, “*is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object....*” This implies that form is, in fact, paramount. In terms of literature, the suggestion is that the text’s poetic language—its “artfulness”—is all that really matters. “It is literariness and not mimesis which interests the Formalists [including and especially Shklovsky],” Jefferson writes. “Ultimately defamiliarization is a question of form and only form.”⁸ In good Russian Formalist fashion, Shklovsky seems here to be saying that a text’s content is, as Eagleton puts it, “merely the ‘motivation’ of form, or convenience for a particular kind of formal exercise.”

What to make of this seeming inconsistency in Shklovsky? It is possible, I suppose, simply to chalk it up to a failure in logic, to view it as an unresolvable contradiction. I, however, would argue that there is no real inconsistency, no contradiction, in Shklovsky’s stance. Instead, Shklovsky is, I believe, making a complex claim about the way poetic language works. In brief, he is implicitly asserting that such language does not merely reflect reality but rather constitutes, remakes it in special terms. Poetic language, that is, imaginatively transforms the world to which it refers. Put another way, yes, art does give us things in the world, but it gives us those things not in their raw, objective essence but instead as they have been translated into the signifiers and signifieds of literary language.

Shklovsky’s assertion that “[t]he purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” should be read not as a claim about how art allows us to experience things as they really are but instead as a statement about how art substitutes its way of subjectively constructing things (“as they are perceived”) for another, more conventional and “algebraic” way of depicting the world (“as they are known”). What is the vehicle of perception in a literary work of art? It is the author’s words, his or her poetic language. What gives us “the sensation of things” in a poem, novel, or short story? It is the text’s language, what Russian Formalists call its literariness. The words, the language of a literary text are just that: poetic words, language. They are concepts and ideas, metaphors and symbols, images and metonymies,

not raw stuff in the world. It is important to read Shklovsky's claim that art "make[s] objects 'unfamiliar'" in its full context. Art defamiliarizes objects, says Shklovsky, in the sense that it "increases the difficulty and length of perception," a process that "is an *aesthetic* [italics mine] end in itself," not a scientific one that purports to give us things as they objectively are. We do not experience the inherent essence of objects in art. To the contrary, the artwork provides for us "*a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object.*"

Clearly, then, when Shklovsky says that the artist makes "the stone *stony*," he is not, in fact, suggesting that the artist somehow lifts the veil from the stone so that we see it as it is itself. Rather, he implies that the stoniness of the stone is a function of the artist's vision, which he or she projects upon the stone through his or her medium. The literary artist makes objects "unfamiliar" by converting those objects into the language of his or her literary text. He or she dehabituates our way of seeing things, "recovers objects from the automatism of perception," in the sense of translating one way of seeing—automatic, non-reflective, familiar—into another, more nuanced, complex, and felt-into vision, one that the artist conveys through his or her literary art. It is true, as Jefferson writes, that "[u]ltimately defamiliarization is a question of form and only form," but that form, it is important to recognize, constitutes aesthetic objects. In sum, in claiming that "*the object is not important*," Shklovsky is asserting that what matters in art, what makes the work of art a work of art, is the object as the artist interpretively renders it, not the object as it factually, objectively is.

Shklovsky goes to great lengths, not only in "Art as Technique" but in other essays as well, to identify and analyze literature's distinguishing features, its many defamiliarizing devices. He focuses on explaining how, exactly, literary language transforms the world. For instance, in "Art as Technique" Shklovsky explains how Tolstoy "makes the familiar strange" in his story "Kholstomer" by describing "the institution of private property" in the language a horse might use, from the animal's perspective. Writes Shklovsky, "[t]he narrator of 'Kholstomer'...is a horse, and it is the horse's point of view (rather than the person's) that makes the content of the story seem unfamiliar." And in his essay "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*:

Stylistic Commentary,” Shklovsky calls *Tristram Shandy* “the most typical novel in world literature”⁹ because it so deliberately foregrounds its literary devices, so explicitly advertises itself as what it, like all novels, is: a work of art rather than a mirror of reality. For example, Shklovsky notes that *Tristram Shandy* defamiliarizes reality through its jumbled structure. That structure, “is strictly regulated, like a picture by Picasso. Everything in the book is displaced; everything is transposed.”

III

Shklovsky’s view has rich implications for the understanding of haiku. First, it constitutes an alternative to a certain traditionalist belief that haiku transparently mirror the world, a belief typified by assertions such as Kenneth Yasuda’s that the haiku poet is “interested in the object for its own sake.”¹⁰ Conversely, it can provide an historical context and extended theoretical framework for the outlook of certain contemporary haiku theorists such as Peter Yovu who suggests that a haiku “is an act of imagination” that “transform[s] sense-data into meaning.”¹¹ Secondly, and more significantly, applying to haiku Shklovsky’s ideas about how literary language, through its diverse devices, defamiliarizes reality can yield useful insights into how exactly haiku work, how they might be interpreted and what their special aesthetic contributions are. It is possible, to identify a range of defamiliarizing devices that are specific to haiku, ways in which these short poems deautomatize perception that other, longer genres do not.

In order to identify the defamiliarizing devices that are unique to haiku, it is first necessary to define the genre itself, to determine exactly what a haiku is. Genres, Charles Bazerman argues, “are only the types individuals recognize as being used by themselves and others. Genres are what we believe they are. That is, they are social facts...”¹² As anyone who has perused the pages of major haiku journals, such as *Frogpond* and *Modern Haiku*, over the last several years can attest, what haiku poets and theorists have recognized as haiku, what they have believed them to be, has varied widely. Gurga’s “Newku for Old?” is just one of the latest in a long line of attempts to identify central features of the genre. In what follows, I will concentrate on a universal feature of haiku, a trait that all

definitions of haiku include and all published haiku reflect: brevity. The ways in which haiku defamiliarize reality, I believe, are all tied to this feature.

In a recent interview, Kevin Bailey, the editor and founder of the distinguished British publication *Haiku Quarterly*, proclaims that “[a]t the core of haiku remains the mentally explosive reaction to a few resonant words. That, in any language and culture, can probably be described as ‘haiku.’ The rest is literary pedantry.”¹³ I concur with Bailey’s assessment. A haiku—at least a successful one—is, in its irreducible essence, simply a poem consisting of “a few resonant words” that cause a “mentally explosive reaction” in the reader. Of course if they are any good, longer poems, and even short stories and novels, contain “resonant words” that create a “mentally explosive reaction” in the reader. But what distinguishes haiku from those other genres is that the “resonant words” are so “few.” More specifically, a haiku almost never contains words that total more than seventeen syllables, and more frequently than not, the syllable count is less than that. In practical terms, the one thing a poem must always be in order to be accepted for publication in a major haiku journal is short, if more than seventeen total syllables then only by a few.

The way, then, that haiku defamiliarize reality is through various means of verbal compression. These particular forms of compression are what produce the unique resonance, the special explosiveness, of haiku; it is what, in Shklovskian terms, transforms reality into haiku’s specific mode of deautomatized perception. It would perhaps be possible to come up with a fixed and limited set of ways verbal compression is achieved in haiku, a few distinct compressive devices haiku employ. But haiku are so rich and varied that such a list would inevitably exclude some excellent poems, atypical haiku that either do not contain all of the items on the list or display others not included.

Thus, rather than attempt to compile a comprehensive roster of devices, I will follow Shklovsky’s lead and concentrate on particular instances of defamiliarization as they appear in a particular text. More specifically, I will focus on a single haiku from a recent issue of *Modern Haiku*—Summer 2015—which, it seems to me, is a fairly typical and conventional, though certainly very fine, example of the genre, and identify key

compressive devices it employs. Surely if it can be shown that this conventional poem, selected pretty much at random for its typicality, defamiliarizes reality through various forms of verbal compression, it would be even easier to demonstrate how a less conventional, more experimental haiku does so. The compressive devices I will identify and discuss with respect to the poem I have selected are certainly ones that can be found in other haiku. But to repeat, these devices are not intended to exhaust the possibilities. My analysis is simply meant to establish the general principle that verbal compression effectively defamiliarizes reality in haiku, and to identify some typical permutations of this general principle that can be found in a particular, conventional example of the genre.

IV

red leaves
her scent
on the pillow¹⁴

This evocative poem by Geoff Anderson isolates, in characteristic haiku fashion, a moment in time: the instant in which an unspecified narrator detects a scent on a pillow that reminds him or her of red leaves. The poem defamiliarizes reality by halting the continuous flow of experience—the sort of flow often mimicked in novels, short stories, and longer poems—and in only seven words capturing in full, in all its richness, the instant in time that is memorialized. Anderson's haiku demonstrates that a complex act—stopping time and revealing the fullness of a particular instant—does not require a detailed linguistic expose, as might be assumed, but rather can be successfully accomplished in a severely compressed text.

What makes the particular moment in this poem so semantically rich is as much the words that are *not* used as the ones that are. Leaves, to begin with the poem's opening image, are in nature always either on a tree or have fallen from one. Anderson does not tell us which. Are the leaves red because that is the color they are on the tree in spring and summer? The Japanese stripped-bark maple, for example, has such leaves. Or, does the red of the leaves signify autumn, a time of the year when dying leaves,

whether still on the tree or having already fallen to the ground from it, sometimes assume a reddish hue?

Furthermore, the word “red” in isolation—calling attention to itself as it does because it constitutes half the total words of the poem’s first line—has multiple connotations. Red might mean danger, the sort of danger signified by a traffic light or stop sign. This connotation would enrich both the red-leaves-as-fall-leaves and the red-leaves-as-spring/summer leaves readings: the red of fall leaves warns of impending death, and the red of spring/summer leaves suggests the dangers of impetuous youth. Or perhaps red might signify life-blood, passion and desire, which would be in keeping with the idea that the red leaves are red leaves of spring or summer. Yet another possibility, to return to the idea that the red leaves connote autumn, is that the red might signify love and passion that are passing, that like fall leaves are sadly dead or dying.

The opening red leaves image, to sum up in Shklovskian terms, defamiliarizes reality by constituting a tight, minimalist focus—one cut off from any limiting context in which red leaves would naturally appear—that transforms raw stuff in the world into a poetic line which denotes that raw stuff but at the same time has, as a result of its brevity, multiple metaphorical connotations. And the same is true for the second image in the poem: the narrator experiencing the scent of a female on a pillow. The image’s verbal compression—the fact that it consists of only five words—creates multiple possibilities for interpretation. The narrator might be a man or might be a woman. The “her” whose scent is detected might be an older woman, a middle-aged woman, a younger woman, or even a young girl. The pillow might be in the bed of a married couple, a bed unmarried lovers share, the bed a man separated from his lover sleeps in alone, or a bed that a mother sometimes shares with her young daughter. For that matter, the pillow might not even be one in a bed. It might, for instance, be a pillow on a couch or in a car. These rich connotations are made possible by Anderson’s use of so few qualifying words. Reality is defamiliarized by language that, by virtue of its extreme brevity, omits any limiting context.

Though even in isolation each image in the poem—the red leaves and the narrator detecting the scent of a female on a pillow—defamiliarizes

reality through verbal compression, thereby opening the possibility for multiple interpretations, what makes the poem a poem is, of course, the joining, the juxtaposition, of these two images. And this joining, this juxtaposition, is achieved through another instance of verbal compression. In typical haiku fashion, the author uses no words at all to connect the poem's principal, distinct images. Instead, he leaves it to the reader to supply any meaningful links. That is to say, Anderson connects the images only with a gap—a verbal absence—that begs to be filled. Once again, less is more. Any verbal bridge the author might have constructed would have specified and necessarily narrowed the range of available links. By providing no such bridge, Anderson leaves open an array of ways the reader might meaningfully couple the red leaves and the scent on the pillow. In Shklovskian terms, this literary device—the stark juxtaposition of distinct images with no connecting commentary—defamiliarizes reality by allowing for and prompting in the reader the construction of multiple possible connections between two objects, each of which itself represents the conversion of raw reality into words that, because they are so few and compressed, have multiple connotations.

What, then, are the specific ways in which the red leaves and scent on the pillow images can be connected? What are the possible interpretations of the poem as a whole? They are legion. Imaginatively linking in different ways the different connotations of the different images produces different meanings for Anderson's haiku. For the sake of brevity, as illustrations, I will outline but two of the multiple readings Anderson's text suggests.

If one reads the narrator of the poem as a man, the red leaves as fall leaves, and the red of those leaves as further signifying love and passion; if the "her" who leaves the scent on the pillow is taken to be the narrator's former, lost lover; if the pillow is seen as one in the bed the narrator and his lost lover once shared; and if the scent is a faded one from the past; then the poem can be interpreted as one about a man wistfully, painfully recalling the woman he has lost, grieving over the fact that this woman he once deeply loved and shared his bed with is now gone forever. All that remains of her is her scent. Perhaps this scent is one that is still in the pillow she once slept on, a trace that persists because the narrator cannot

bring himself to wash her pillowcase and thus wash away what little that is left of her actual presence. Or perhaps the trace is only a remembered one, a scent he can so vividly recall from where his lover once slept that it is as if she is still beside him in his now lonely bed. Either way, the scent evokes in the narrator's mind the thought of red leaves. His former lover is like red leaves: she is someone who has fallen from his life as surely as such leaves fall from trees in autumn, but yet her memory—her scent, her trace—remains painfully bright and beautiful, as red as the passion he has in literal fact lost but which is still vividly alive in his thoughts, seared in his heart.

There is another, very different way to read the poem. The red leaves may be interpreted as fully alive ones on a tree in full bloom, in spring; the red, then, suggests youth and vitality, life-blood. The narrator may be viewed as a woman, a mother. The “her” who leaves the scent on the pillow may be taken to be the woman's young daughter. Perhaps this little girl, scared of the dark, was afraid to sleep alone one night so her caring and sympathetic mother allowed her daughter to sleep in bed beside her. The next morning, no longer fearful in the light of day, the little girl gets up before her mother rises. When the mother finally wakes, she can still smell her daughter in the pillow the girl slept on. This scent is a most pleasant one, a scent like red leaves flourishing on a tree in that it reminds the mother of her young and vital, in-the-spring-of-her-life daughter. The poem, looked at this way, is a happy one. This is not a poem, as on the first reading, about painful, poignant loss; instead, it is one about caring, joyful possession. It is a poem about a mother's love for and delight in her beautiful young daughter, a daughter who still lives with her mother, under her mother's kind and generous care.

Shklovsky insists: “...*the object is not important.*” The real stuff in the world—those objects—that Anderson's haiku transforms into words with multiple connotations is just ordinary, everyday, raw stuff. Red leaves and a female's scent on a pillow, in their strict denotative senses, are of no special interest, are common, mundane items. What my analysis of the poem has shown is that, in Shklovsky's words, “[a]rt is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object....” The poem promotes such an experience by featuring, through various forms of verbal compression, those

red leaves, the female's scent on a pillow, and the potential conjunction between the two in such a way as to draw out the multiple metaphorical connotations of these objects separately and to suggest multiple, metaphorical connections that bind them together.

V

As Shklovsky's essay on *Tristram Shandy* illustrates, particular novels defamiliarize reality in particular ways. And short stories and longer poems, Shklovsky's view suggests, also defamiliarize reality in particular ways. What I have tried to show above is that haiku, through multiple strategies of verbal compression, defamiliarize reality in ways specific to the genre. To be sure, longer forms can and sometimes do themselves employ certain forms of verbal compression. In a recent *New Yorker* essay entitled "Omission: Choosing What to Leave Out," John McPhee highlights the presence and virtues of succinctness in the work of writers from Hemingway to Calvin Trillin.¹⁵ But the extreme brevity of haiku, their severe verbal economy achieved by specific techniques such as the ones outlined above, allows them to convey to the reader an experience of the "artfulness of an object" that obviously differs from that of texts containing significantly more words and thus employing, if they employ them at all, different forms of verbal compression. Why write haiku? Why read them? Because these minimalist poems constitute and make available an aesthetic experience not constituted nor made available in novels, short stories, and longer poems.

Notes

¹ Gurga, Lee. "Newku for Old? Haiku 21 and Haiku 2014 as Guides to the Experimental and Traditional in Haiku (With an Extended Digression into Richard Gilbert's *The Disjunctive Dragonfly*). *Frogpond* 38.1 (2015).

² Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique." *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. eds. and trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1965.

³ Jefferson, Ann and David Robey, eds. "Russian Formalism." *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1982.

⁴ Margolin, Uri. "Russian Formalism." *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism, 2nd ed.* Eds. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005.

⁵ Selden, Raman, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Fifth ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005.

⁶ Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.

⁷ Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique."

⁸ Jefferson, Ann and David Robey, eds. "Russian Formalism."

⁹ Shklovsky, Victor. "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary." *Russian Formalist Criticism*. Eds. and trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1965.

¹⁰ Yasuda, Kenneth. *The Japanese Haiku: Its Essential Nature, History and Possibilities in English, with Selected Examples*. Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1957.

¹¹ Yovu, Peter. "Do Something Different." *Frogpond* 31.1 (2008): 51-61.

¹² Bazerman, Charles. "Speech Acts, Genres, and Activity Systems: How Texts Organize Activity and People." *What Writing Does and How It Does It: An Introduction to Analyzing Texts and Textual Practices*. Eds. Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior. London: Routledge, 2004.

¹³ Hogan, Michael Paul. "Kevin Bailey & Haiku Quarterly." *Modern Haiku* 46.2 (2015).

¹⁴ Anderson, Geoff. "red leaves." *Modern Haiku* 46.2 (2015).

¹⁵ McPhee, John. "Omission: Choosing What to Leave Out." *The New Yorker* 14 Sept. 2015.