Extraordinary Ordinariness: Realism Now and Then

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*We do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual.*

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

I.

1 Famously, realism is concerned with ordinary experience. And yet, there has always been something strange and troubling about this. Isn’t the ordinary also deeply boring? In *New Grub Street*, George Gissing’s realist writer character insists that his novel will reproduce life as it is. The book “will be something unutterably tedious,” he explains. “If it were anything but tedious, it would be untrue” (265; vol. 1).

2 Critics disagree about how much ordinariness a narrative can sustain. Elaine Scarry has argued that the impulse to widen the scope of representation in the nineteenth century to include the everyday life of workers necessarily conflicted with the demands of narrative. What characterizes working-class experience is “perpetual, repetitive, habitual” labor. To ignore the repetitiveness of labor would be to falsify it, Scarry argues, but to represent it would be to mire narrative in a kind of non-narratable monotony (68). Franco Moretti, on the other hand, makes the case that growing bourgeois audiences enjoyed the absence of extraordinary events in the realist novel. Since the new middle class valorized order and routine, Moretti speculates that realist novels deliberately incorporate “fillers,” which “offer the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life” (381; vol. 1). Most recently, Amy M. King has argued that nineteenth-century British readers and writers, steeped in natural theology, learned to see divine splendor in small, local details. This reverence for detail...
trained them not to read for narrative resolutions, but rather to take pleasure in protracted descriptive passages, such as those that fill Mary Russell Mitford’s extremely popular—and mostly plot-less—five-volume *Our Village* (1826-32).

3 But despite their differences, all of these critics share one assumption—that realism is opposed to narrative excitement. In this essay, I want to propose an alternative, a way to bring together realist ordinariness with the thrilling pleasures of narrative. Joining them is a paradoxical technique I call the shock of the banal—a jolt of surprise in response to the most routine of experiences.[1] I first experienced this shock in the contemporary television serial dramas that are most often compared with Victorian novels: *The Sopranos, The Wire,* and *Mad Men.* I then came to realize that the nineteenth-century realist novel had invented the technique—and put it to excellent and imaginative use. But there was a reason that I recognized it on television before I could see it in the novel: it works best from a specific historical vantage point. In order to experience the shock of the banal, one should be habituated to a particular set of routines—a historically-situated experience of ordinariness.

4 Since we can most easily grasp these realist surprises in the texts of our own moment, I will start with the new serial television and then move backward to explore the shocks of the nineteenth-century novel, including examples from *Adam Bede, Bleak House,* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Along the way, I will explore three kinds of shock—the shock of recognition, the shock of historical difference, and the shock of social violence. All three revolve around a jolt of surprise at habit, routine—sheer ordinariness.

5 Let me start by considering the premise of *The Sopranos.* A mafia boss suffers from panic attacks and has to learn from regular therapy sessions to let go of the dream of total control. The typically glamorized figure of the ruthless mafia don is reduced to the condition of the absurdly mundane. And it is not only in the therapist’s office; tending his lawn and driving a Chevy Suburban, Tony takes his daughter to visit liberal arts colleges, fights with his mother about going into a nursing home, and worries about his son’s attention deficit disorder. In these moments, he startles us not by his willingness to commit violence, but by his entanglements in the commonplace.

6 *The Wire* makes a comparable move. The illicit business of street drugs turns out to be as mundanely bureaucratic as the police force: both are subject to bad management, ineffective organizational plans, and a frustrating absence of qualified personnel. Season 3, for example, opens in the first episode with police detectives planning to arrest a mid-level dealer. They expect him to be replaced with a garrulous underling whose chatter, they hope, could give the whole game away. “What makes you think they’ll promote the wrong man?” asks the Police Commissioner “We do it all the time,” Daniels responds. With its pecking orders, incentives, and quality assessment, the Barksdale criminal enterprise faces the same daily struggles as any state-run agency. Character Stringer Bell’s borrowing of *Robert’s Rules of Order* for his cross-Baltimore drug consortium is perhaps the most elegant example of humdrum bureaucracy at the heart of the deadly drug business.
Mad Men does not dwell on shocking criminal underworlds, but the AMC show does offer some analogous shocks. As we encounter smoking pregnant women, three-martini lunches, and conversations about a woman’s immaturity between her therapist and her husband, we are startled not by the sensational, but by the mundane. Can it be true that eating raw eggs or smacking a neighbor’s child across the face used to be so awfully ordinary?

8
All three series startle us, then, with representations of everydayness. The ordinariness of The Sopranos and The Wire is shockingly similar to the ordinariness of the contemporary middle class, only in circumstances that to most viewers will be exotic—the murderous underworlds of mafia and drug trade. The ordinariness of Mad Men is remote, but in regular middle-class homes and offices. While the first two shows surprise us with the banal in extraordinary places, Mad Men startles us with the extraordinary in banal places.

9
These experiences of strangeness-in-familiarity might immediately call to mind the experience of the uncanny. For Sigmund Freud in “The Uncanny,” the unheimlich refers to the negation of the experience of feeling “at home”—producing discomfort and unease. But since the sensation of uncanniness emerges from desires that have been repressed, and since those desires begin in the infant self, they are in some sense more intimate and private—more heimlich—than the experience of feeling “at home.” Thus the unheimlich always tacks back and forth between familiarity and strangeness. And yet, while there are resonant echoes of Freud in the shocks of these television serials, I would argue that The Sopranos, The Wire, and Mad Men do not offer us precisely the uncanniness Freud described. If there are infantile feelings in The Wire and The Sopranos, they are those that are most out in the open: violence, vengefulness, greed. Thus they turn usual experience of the uncanny upside-down; what return, unbidden, are the routines of ordinary life, their very mundaneness producing our frisson of surprise. The role of the repressed in Mad Men’s version of the uncanny is even subtler. When the Drapers, at the end of a picnic in an idyllic country scene, dump their garbage on the grass and leave, or when the children run around the house covered in dry cleaner bags, these startling actions do not gesture to the fulfillment of frightening and shameful desires but to a fully functioning regime of thoughtless habits, markedly different from our own, but equally routinized and automatic. What has been repressed is another system of repression. The feelings of strangeness provoked by scenes like these, then, are not the excitements of desire, aggression, and fear but the recognition of routine.

10
If the shock of the banal eludes the uncanny in some crucial ways, it might seem like a better theoretical fit with defamiliarization. After all, the televisual scenes we have described succeed in making the everyday strange. Viktor Shklovsky writes against the deadening habits that have taken the place of genuine and attentive perception: “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war.” Only art works against this terrifying mindlessness: “The purpose 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” (12). But here again, as with Freud, the theoretical fit is imperfect. Shklovsky puts his emphasis on slowing down perception in order to disrupt habit, whereas the shock of the banal in The Sopranos, The Wire, and Mad Men takes shape as a sudden jolt, a quick frisson of recognition. We are far here from the
elongation of descriptive passages, narrated from the perspective of an outsider—Natasha at the opera in *War and Peace* or the horse narrator in *Strider*, for example—which, in dwelling on the strangeness of ordinary experience, deliberately interrupt narrative flow and prevent people and objects from being simply put to use for plotted ends. Instead, what is remarkable about the shock of the banal is that it goes with the flow; it keeps things moving along. It actually supports precisely the kind of instrumentality Shklovsky abhors. *The Wire*, for example, allows us to grasp the day-to-day workings of the drug business quickly, precisely by invoking a structural parallel to more a familiar world (the world of other bureaucracies), calling up a whole range of experiences that are so well known and have been represented so many times that they do not need to be given again in any detail. In a flash, *The Wire* maps a whole regime of mundane, habitual practices and routines onto an illicit underworld. Its shock of the banal does not slowly defamiliarize, then; it swiftly de- and re-familiarizes.

11 *Mad Men*’s shocks are a little different, but they are similarly un-Shklovskian. Taking place in fleeting asides and moments that serve as mere backdrop (a shot of a pregnant woman smoking, or of a child in a car without seatbelts), *Mad Men*’s jolts of recognition, like those in *The Wire*, are deliberately quick. And rather than divesting us of routinized perception, they again capture in quick glimpses a sense of the vast numbers of repetitive routines that organize our experience. Each shock reminds us how mired we are in daily habits, from smoking to seatbelts. By jarring us with sudden insights into the ways that the most mechanical routines change over time, *Mad Men* offers not a way outside of habit but a flash of insight into habit’s historical contingency.

12 It is my contention, then, that contemporary television serials manage to convey mundane regularity in a way that is itself startling and even funny, giving us a rich representation of routine without getting mired in such monotony that they bring all narratable action to a halt. In so doing, they offer a way past the critical opposition between realist ordinariness and narrative excitement. If this seems like a remarkable feat, the credit belongs not to television, I believe, but to Victorian novelists, who developed these techniques skillfully and successfully, but in ways that are difficult to apprehend from a substantial historical distance.

II.

13 To be sure, there may be dangers in working backwards from contemporary television to the Victorian novel. In this issue, John Plotz warns us that imposing the perceptions of our own times onto the Victorians may limit us, “the influence of *Mad Men* on Trollope” persuading us too hastily into claims for correspondence between then and now. But I want to make two opposing claims about history here. On the one hand, I want to suggest that the shock of the banal is successfully transhistorical in the sense that it has traveled, pretty much intact, from the Victorian period into our own. I am not making a comparison between two eras, risking the imposition of one historically-situated kind of perception onto another, but rather staking a claim for the portability of literary techniques, a contention that literary forms travel across historical contexts. On the other hand, I want to make the case that each shock of the banal must be radically situated, historically speaking, because it will not work unless we share a whole regime of ordinariness with the text that seeks to make it strange.
We can see both of these principles—the transhistorical and the historically-situated—at work in the locus classicus of Victorian realism, chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*. This chapter is an essay within the novel which puts forward a theory of ethical realism that rejects idealized heroes and saintly souls in favor of flawed ordinary people:

> These fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions; and it is these people—amongst whom your life is passed—that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love: it is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people, whose movements of goodness you should be able to admire—for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience. And I would not, even if I had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this, in which we get up in the morning to do our daily work, that you would be likely to turn a harder, colder eye on the dusty streets and the common green fields—on the real breathing men and women, who can be chilled by your indifference or injured by your prejudice; who can be cheered and helped onward by your fellow-feeling, your forbearance, your outspoken, brave justice. (*Adam Bede* 160)

If chapter 17 offers a deliberate celebration of ordinariness, what opens the famous essay on realism is an expression of shock: “‘THIS Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!’ I hear one of my lady readers exclaim” (159). In response, the narrator points to the difference between the habits of her own moment and those of a historical past:

> Sixty years ago—it is a long time, so no wonder things have changed—all clergymen were not zealous; indeed, there is reason to believe that the number of zealous clergymen was small, and it is probable that if one among the small minority had owned the livings of Broxton and Hayslope in the year 1799, you would have liked him no better than you like Mr Irwine. (159)

Remarkably like *Mad Men*, *Adam Bede* marks the distance habits have traveled in sixty years, looking back to a time when different mores governed expectations. But unlike *Mad Men*, Eliot does not envision this as a particularly pleasurable shock for her imagined reader. Unable to believe that people used to have such strange tastes, the horrified reader implores the novelist to change the text to suit contemporary norms: “‘Do improve the facts a little, then; make them more accordant with those correct views which it is our privilege to possess’” (159). The reader believes her own time lays claim to “correct views,” as opposed to the unenlightened past, and asks the narrator to conform to the ideals of the present rather than to the reality of the past.

But to “correct” the novel to suit the moralizing habits of one’s own time would be a double mistake, the narrator suggests: it would be historically inaccurate, distorting our sense of the habits of mind that dominated social experience in 1799; and it would be unethical, since idealized characters lead contemporary readers to reject the ordinary people that inhabit their world. Intriguingly, Eliot is actually merging two forms of ordinariness here: the ordinariness of a particular regime of normalizing judgments; and the ordinariness of daily work, “monotonous homely existence” (157). On the one hand, chapter 17 historicizes, much as *Mad Men* does, startling us with the habits of a
recent time; on the other hand, the narrator is deliberately transhistorical: “I am not at all sure that the majority of the human race have not been ugly” (161). The target of both critiques is the reader’s sense of idealizing superiority. The danger of the historicizing perspective is that it might actually bolster the reader’s feelings of disdain; we are liable to think of ourselves as belonging to a time of “enlightened opinions and refined taste,” scornful of a bygone age (159). But if the ordinariness of our own time also fails to fit our enlightened ideals, then everydayness today must successfully challenge our habits of complacent superiority too.

16
There are not just two kinds of ordinariness, but also two systems of habit, at work here: first, habits of normalizing expectation and disdainful judgment; and second, routines of life and labor. Since all cultures are organized around patterns of work and community, the latter version of habit is inescapable and universal, while the habit of moral judgment emerges as not only historically specific but also paradoxical and untenable; it is a routine of despising routine, an ordinary view that we should dismiss the ordinary. Like *Mad Men*, then, Eliot startles her readers with a time just distant enough to feel familiar and unfamiliar, but *Adam Bede* goes farther than *Mad Men* in launching a double shock of the banal: the first allows readers a jolt of surprise at a regime of norms and habits that held sway sixty years earlier; the second warns audiences away from the ordinary habit of understanding ourselves as above ordinary habits.

III.

17
In comparing the novel to the television series, I am struck by how lucky it is for me that in chapter 17 Eliot draws explicit attention to the distance in conventional expectations for clergy between 1799 and 1859. If she had not paused to note that she was administering a surprise, I would not have guessed it was there; too far removed from the norms of the Anglican Church in 1859, I would not have felt a shock at the Reverend Irwine’s worldliness. Thus it seems crucial to recognize the historical particularity of realist shocks; we must be immersed in the norms of a particular moment in order to feel surprised by the difference in ordinary experience across time. But there is also a transhistorical potential here: Eliot suggests that realist surprise can be mobilized at any time because the ordinary is generalizable. Thus the shock of the banal can reappear in our own time as a realist mode par excellence.

18
In fact, I want to call attention to an intriguing moment of realist shock in *Adam Bede* that has successfully traveled from then to now, though in this case the narrator does not go out of her way to mark it. Early in the novel, Arthur gives a book to Mr. Irwine’s mother. “I know you are fond of queer, wizard-like stories,” he says. “It’s a volume of poems, ‘Lyrical Ballads’: most of them seem to be twaddling stuff; but the first is in a different style—‘The Ancient Mariner’ is the title” (59-60). This is the shock of the banal, *Mad Men* style—a quick jolt of recognition, a frisson of pleasurable surprise. It works today because readers—at least literary ones—have continued to share some of the ordinariness of 1859, which is different from the norm of 1799; for us, Wordsworth is not “twaddling,” nor Coleridge “queer.” Both form part of that habit we call the canon.
The moment of encountering *Lyrical Ballads* in the novel prompts me to ask how many more shocks of the banal are at work in *Adam Bede* that I am too far removed to feel—shocks at clothing styles and outmoded idioms, farming practices and harvest suppers? I am only alert to the literary shock because this is my own area of expertise. I can imagine a viewer of *Mad Men* a century from now, fuzzy on the differences between 1962 and 2012, missing all of the shocks we experience now. This leads me to wonder whether nineteenth-century realism was far more dependent on the shock of the banal than we, at our historical distance, are able to grasp.

20

If the shock of the banal usually works without self-conscious markers, as in *Mad Men*’s casual racism or Arthur’s gift of *Lyrical Ballads*, it seems intriguing that Eliot goes to the trouble of marking the particular surprise that opens chapter 17. I want to suggest that this has everything to do with her project of articulating a new theory of realism.[2] In fact, Eliot had already linked realism to surprise. In “The Natural History of German Life” (1856), that other early exploration of a new realist aesthetic, she wrote: “a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment” (54). It is emphatically not the case, then, that this famous theorist of nineteenth-century realism embraces the ordinary in a way that is supposed to feel given, natural, or calm; instead, as Eliot carefully and influentially formulates it, realism demands that we be shocked out of our routines of perception and judgment into a recognition of monotonous homely existence. This is a realism deliberately and dramatically unlike Moretti’s model of a bourgeoisie soothing itself with comfortable routines. It is first and foremost dependent on surprise.

IV.

21

George Eliot is not the only novelist of her time to link shock to realism. Let me now introduce a second Victorian example, both to broaden my claims about realist surprise in the nineteenth-century novel and to explore a different version of the shock of the banal. The example comes from *Bleak House*, right before Jo, the crossing sweeper, dies. The third-person narrator goes out of the way to emphasize the boy’s ordinariness:

He is not one of Mrs. Pardiggle’s Tockahooopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs. Jellyby’s lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borriboola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article. Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of the common streets, only in soul a heathen. Homely filth begrades him, homely parasites devour him, homely sores are in him, homely rags are on him: native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish. Stand forth, Jo, in uncompromising colours! From the sole of thy foot to the crown of thy head, there is nothing interesting about thee. (564)

There is, of course, a troubling nationalism at work here, as Dickens urges readers to look after the poor at home instead of reaching out to people in distant places. But I want to put a slightly different pressure on the relationship between foreign and domestic for a moment. Distance and unfamiliarity, according to Dickens, “soften” our image of the remote heathen, making him seem appealing and
interesting. By contrast, Jo’s closeness and familiarity make him both repellent and uninteresting. There is a kind of circular logic at work here: first we ignore the poor because they are all around us and so feel too familiar for us to take any interest; then we become so used to ignoring poverty that we fail to notice how shockingly everyday it is. Not only is one boy dead, but others are also “dying thus around us every day” (572). It is the common things we are inclined to ignore, but their commonness is, in fact, precisely what is shocking about them. What Dickens needs, then, is a representational strategy that will shock us into recognizing the familiar—as both everyday and shocking. This is even harder than startling us with strange habits that are ordinary elsewhere, as do Adam Bede and Mad Men; and it is harder, too, than locating the ordinary in sensational places, as do The Wire and The Sopranos; Dickens’s challenge is to make the ordinary, as ordinary, feel shocking.

The novel manages this task with what now probably feel like pretty tried-and-true realist tactics: it gives a relatively rich interior life to a socially marginalized figure, and it lends Jo a lot of narrative importance as a hub for events in the plot. Jo takes on the qualities of a rounded character whose uniqueness presumably often overpowers his ordinariness for readers. But then Dickens also tries to jolt us with the recognition that Jo is, in fact, not unique after all, but one of many poor children dying around us every day. To be precise, Jo is both extraordinary—individuated, feeling, sympathetic—and ordinary—representing the poor in general. All poor children, the realist novelist implies, would be as individuated as Jo is for us if we knew them. In this sense, representing the poor as rounded individual characters—which is of course a staple of the realist enterprise—could actually be seen as another instance of the shock of the banal. Poverty, an ordinary condition, becomes individuated and therefore specific and extraordinary, but only in order to represent something larger than the individual—the shocking reality of poverty’s ordinariness.

I am both drawing on Alex Woloch’s work on character and departing from it here. Woloch makes the brilliantly revelatory argument that the realist novel “registers the competing pull of inequality and democracy” characteristic of the nineteenth-century middle class (31). On the one hand, realism democratizes its field of representation such that anyone can, in theory, become a major figure in the novel—including prostitutes, beggars, and thieves. On the other hand, the novel always narrows its focus to a small number of richly rounded characters: “any character can be a protagonist, but only one character is” (31). Woloch puts forward a convincing account of the novel’s “character system” as always “asymmetric.” His reading of Dickens focuses on the memorably flat, eccentric minor characters that surround and overwhelm the deliberately weak protagonist, “who gets swarmed by the very minorness that he creates through his centrality” (178).

Jo does not figure in Woloch’s account, and I want to suggest that this is telling. Jo does some democratizing work for the novel, expanding its field of representation by standing in for the vast number of poor children who populate modern urban streets, while he also individuates that experience through his sympathetic interior experiences of sincere good will, puzzlement, guilt, and fear. Bleak House certainly has its share of flattened eccentrics—Skimpole, Grandfather Smallweed, and Mrs. Jellyby, for example—but Jo is not among them. He is not quite a protagonist, but nor is he doomed to a rigid and functional minorness. Jo, that is, gestures to a politics of the realist novel that emerges not out of the dynamics of an enclosed character system structured by inequality, but out of a
more referential, reader-centered dynamics of extraordinariness-in-ordinariness—the movement of realist shock. In this case, Jo offers a mixture of quintessentially bourgeois interiority alongside startling deviations from comfortable middle-class everydayness.

25
I am reverting here to an older, more familiar reading of realism, one that long predates Woloch. It is a realism that deliberately fuses the type and the individual, the social and the personal, seeking to spur outrage and social reform. And I want to defend this long tradition, arguing that realism’s politics works more successfully than Woloch suggests when it operates through revelations of a pervasively disturbing ordinariness.

26
It is the shock of the banal, for example, that Harriet Beecher Stowe begins to unpack in this passage from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*:

Facts too shocking to be contemplated occasionally force their way to the public ear, and the comment that one often hears made on them is more shocking than the thing itself. It is said, “Very likely such cases may now and then occur, but they are no sample of general practice.” If the laws of New England were so arranged that a master could now and then torture an apprentice to death, would it be received with equal composure? Would it be said, “These cases are rare, and no samples of general practice”? This injustice is an inherent one in the slave system,—it cannot exist without it. (511)

Stowe actually squeezes together two political arguments here: first, she refuses to excuse the individual case by imagining slavery transported to New England, intending to shock her reader by translating the excuses made by southern slave-holders into the familiarity of their own, non-slaveholding world; and second, she insists on the systematic cruelty of slavery, the necessarily routine violence of a system founded on injustice. Both arguments depend on a play of extraordinariness and ordinariness: the first imagines the startling exception in ordinary surroundings; the second shows that, far from exceptional, each shocking instance is all too mundane. It is as if Stowe is compressing the shocks of *Mad Men* with those of *The Wire*.

27
These kinds of shocks are politically crucial, Stowe suggests, because slavery survives by giving itself a veneer of safe ordinariness:

A slave warehouse! Perhaps some of my readers conjure up horrible visions of such a place. They fancy some foul, obscure den, some horrible Tartarus “*informis, ingens, cui lumen ademptum.*” But no, innocent friend; in these days men have learned the art of sinning expertly and genteelly, so as not to shock the eyes and senses of respectable society. Human property is high in the market; and is, therefore, well fed, well cleaned, tended, and looked after, that it may come to sale sleek, and strong, and shining. A slave-warehouse in New Orleans is a house externally not much unlike many others, kept with neatness; and where every day you may see arranged, under a sort of shed along the outside, rows of men and women, who stand there as a sign of the property sold within. (379)
Canny slave traders make the warehouse look homely and familiar enough to foreclose a shocked response. Observers find their eyes soothed by the ordinariness of the scene—"a house externally not much unlike many others." It is strategically urgent, therefore, for the realist novelist to keep both ordinariness and extraordinariness in play: to startle us with the cruelty and injustice that is masked by familiar surroundings, and to shock us with the everydayness of a violence that should always feel like a painful exception.

With the question of everyday violence, let me return to a final, brief example from *The Wire*. Not only does David Simon’s HBO series reveal bureaucratic ordinariness at the heart of the illicit underworld of the drug trade, as we saw earlier, but it also, like *Bleak House* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, explores the shocking mundaneness of urban poverty in a way that seeks to provoke a political response. By way of a conclusion, I want to point to one of the most painful moments in the TV series, which results not from street or prison violence, but from the collision of two humdrum routines. I am thinking here of Duquan’s graduation from middle school. Part of a beleaguered school system’s attempt to show that its students are advancing academically, Duquan is suddenly expected to move forward to the ninth grade at mid-year. Breaking with the widespread practice of social promotion—which moves children forward with their peers by age, rather than academic level—the change is routine in its own way, part of a regular political campaign cycle where incumbents want to claim success for the city schools. There is nothing extraordinary here—merely a shift from one bureaucratic organization to another. But the consequences will prove catastrophic for Duquan. He is frightened by the socially mature world of high school and so drops out altogether, only to learn that for a boy like him there are no good alternatives. Forced to leave his middle school cohort, he is not yet old enough to find paid work in a legitimate business, and so, cast out of the bounds of home, school, and workplace, both too old and too young, he faces a bleak future of drug addiction and homelessness. This is a routine both mundane—it is just another bureaucratic method of school promotion, after all—and shocking in its tragic ramifications.

There is a long tradition of understanding realism as an aesthetic that seeks to naturalize, to totalize, and to normalize—to make the status quo feel necessary and incontrovertible. Moretti writes that realist “[d]escriptions turn the present into something so thoroughly pervaded by the past that alternatives become unimaginable” (191). But if the dominant account of realism is that it normalizes the social world, the shock of the banal does precisely the opposite. It makes daily routines seem startlingly out of place—horrifying, funny, artificial, or strange. It is almost as if the Victorian realist novel and contemporary serial television bring together the two opposing projects of representation that open Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*: the bright, easily intelligible world of the Homeric Greeks, which hides nothing “in a perpetual foreground,” and the mysterious, obscure, inexplicable world of the Hebrew Bible, where almost everything important remains unexpressed and fragmentary (9). The shock of the banal suggests that the clear, bright foreground of experience—the visual details, for example, that give us such a strong feeling of historical verisimilitude in *Mad Men*—operate in an environment of thoughtless routine, which is both obvious and hidden, always at work on the very surface of our experience and yet obscured from perception by its very familiarity.[3] Representation must therefore startle us into a recognition of the “perpetual foreground.” And if I am right that these shocks have long been essential to drawing readers to the realist project, then realism, both now and then, creates pleasure, fascination, and strategic political shock by surprising us with ordinariness.
Biographical Notice

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Notes

[2]I have made this argument more fully in “Surprising Realism.”
[3]I am grateful to John Plotz for pointing me to Mimesis.

Bibliography


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A passage in Jonathan Franzen’s novel *Strong Motion*: “There’s a specific damp and melancholy ancient smell that comes out in Boston after sunset, when the weather is cool and windless. . . . It’s the breath from the mouths of old tunnels, the spirit rising from piles of soot-dulled glass and the ballast of old railbeds, from all the silent places where cast iron has been rusting, concrete turning friable and rotten like inorganic Roquefort, petroleum distillates seeping back into the earth.” The passage goes on and on, listing more and more sources of “the smell of the nature that has taken nature’s place”: “the undersides of bridges and the rubble of a thousand embankments, the creosoted piers in oil-slicked waterways, the sheets of *Globe* and *Herald* wrapped around furry rocks in drainage creeks, and the inside of every blackened metal box still extant on deserted right-of-way, purpose and tokens of ownership effaced by weather, keyhole plugged by corrosion: the smell of infrastructure.”¹

Capitalism is often conceived as a shiny display of more or less desirable commodities. The inverse of this vision, infrastructure belongs to capitalism as well—it makes possible the production and distribution of these commodities—while it also sustains life functions like the provision of clean water and the elimination of waste that are categorized as “public

utilities” and are as yet incompletely commodified. Yet unlike commodities, infrastructure is the object of no one’s desire, or no one but a few passionate amateurs. It is not artfully illuminated in a shop window for all to see but tucked away out of the usual sight lines, indeed often inaccessible to all but authorized personnel—personnel who (perhaps because funds have dried up) are here conspicuous by their absence. Infrastructure smells, it seems, because attention is not paid, because it is neglected. And it is neglected because it belongs to the public domain, all other tokens of belonging effaced, owned in effect by no one. The smell of infrastructure is the smell of the public.

The public smell of corrosion, rust, and rottenness that Franzen evokes belongs to a temporality that ought to seem familiar. Once upon a time, dazzling marvels of infrastructural engineering were of course publicly celebrated. But in the eyes of literature and of literary criticism, the narrative of progress based on bridges, tunnels, sewers, railways, gas lines, electrification, and so on almost immediately came to seem naïve and misguided. The modern study of literature, like much Romantic literature itself, was arguably born from nineteenth-century resistance to the criterion of utility. As the origin story is told by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*, criticism emerges out of the concept of culture, and the concept of culture

2. Public utilities can be defined as companies (in the United States, privately owned companies) that are required by law to render adequate service at reasonable prices to all who apply. You know the examples—water, electricity, natural gas, and other services deemed essential to the public welfare. It is because these services are deemed essential to the public welfare that they are regulated directly by the government, which decides what service is adequate and what prices are reasonable, rather than by the usual practice of allowing quality and price to be determined indirectly by the principle of competition. In recent years, there have of course been major incursions into this noncompetitive enclave. As the result of a global politics of privatization and deregulation, many public utilities, like broadcasting and telephone service, have been more or less abandoned to the mercies of the marketplace.

3. According to Christopher Otter, “Infrastructure—roads, sewerage, gas mains—is [intended to] implant and make durable spaces within which the self-control apposite for civil behavior becomes possible.” If so, then infrastructural smell is a sign that the nineteenth-century project of civility has failed, or is in danger of failing—a sign that we are in danger of falling into barbarity. Christopher Otter, “Making Liberalism Durable: Vision and Civility in the Late Victorian City,” *Social History* 27, no. 1 (January 2002): 4. See also Christopher Otter, “Cleansing and Clarifying: Technology and Perception in Nineteenth-Century London,” *Journal of British Studies* 43, no. 1 (January 2004): 40–64.

4. The centenary of New York’s Brooklyn Bridge and the more recent opening of China’s Three Gorges Dam would make interesting possible counterexamples.
emerges in reaction against the proindustrial ideology of utilitarianism. In his chapter about Mill's essays on Bentham and Coleridge, Williams suggests that “the multiplication of physical comforts”—proud instances were new utilities like gas light, running water, rapid postal service, and railway transport—must be seen as intrinsically linked to “the sufferings of the great mass of the people,” which had resulted from the same process.⁵ Pride was therefore misplaced. Mill transcends Bentham, in Williams's eyes, only when he comes to see that “a philosophy like Bentham’s” applies only to the means, not the end—to “the business part of [the] social arrangements,” not to society’s “spiritual interests” (57). Mill's more influential term for the domain of ends and spiritual interests is “culture” (59).⁶ When Matthew Arnold looks down his nose at middle-class complacency about material progress—about how often the trains run from Islington to Camberwell and from Camberwell back to Islington, even though the life in both places is “dismal” and “illiberal” (117)—it's culture that authorizes his contempt for technological innovation and “physical comforts” and the counternarrative of decline in which that contempt is so durably embodied.

The line leading from Arnold and Eliot to Williams (who distinguishes himself from Arnold's Camberwell/Islington sentiments, but to my mind not far enough), to Stuart Hall, and to cultural studies has recently been traced by Francis Mulhern.⁷ Let me add that if the humanities in the era of cultural studies took up Foucault instead of Arnold as our inspiration, and did so without missing a beat, this is in large part because of a constitutive disgust for Bentham and utilitarianism, lodged deep in the interdisciplinary unconscious, a disgust that prepared us to recognize ourselves in Foucault’s gesture of singling out Bentham's Panopticon to stand for what is most wrong with the modern world, or at least for what we are here on earth to make right.

In suggesting that for all its accomplishments, this continuous tradition of anti-utilitarianism is now open to question, my point is not to defend

6. Culture speaks of course to Mill's famous question of whether he would be happy if all his objects in life were realized; it stands for the higher or more genuine end behind these trivial comforts and reforms. Williams also quotes William Morris’s critique of the Fabian socialists who “overestimate the importance of the mechanism of a system of society apart from the end towards which it may be used” (183).
7. Francis Mulhern, Culture/Metaculture (London: Routledge, 2000). Mulhern accuses this culture-inspired tradition (except Williams) of misreading politics itself as merely “instrumental.”
the Panopticon or salvage Bentham himself. To speak telegraphically, my point is that water is being privatized. The privatizing of water has at least as good a claim as the Panopticon to stand for what is most wrong with the world at the present time. Yet thanks to our anti-utilitarian, antigovernmental bias, we of the “cultural left” have little if anything to say about it. We may (and should) register our protest when infrastructure is a target for destruction, as in the U.S. bombing of Iraq and the U.S.-supported Israeli bombing of Lebanon, but we don’t usually think of infrastructure as something to be planned, funded, built, regulated, and sustained. Whatever our political beliefs as individuals, collectively we have trouble defending state or state-regulated institutions even when they absolutely have to be defended. This is a problem.

The Franzen passage stirs up some long overdue doubt about our largely unexamined self-definition. Public utilities smell in the passage above because they are unattended, uncared for, unloved. Yet the passage raises love and care as a possibility, a prospect. The breath, the spirit, the silence, even the furriness of the rocks in the drainage creeks suggest inconspicuous and therefore intriguing animation, life that has been wrongly overlooked, that does not deserve its abandonment. To me, Franzen’s landscape of abandonment sets going a rhetoric of seduction. When he tells us that infrastructure is neglected, he makes us want to preserve it, to care for it. This is of course not everyone’s idea of passion. The caring implied here seems sober and familial, a love devoted less to erotic ecstasy than to fighting off the inevitability of decay. (An analogy presents itself between the practice of the humanities and the humble activities of maintenance.) Franzen’s better-known novel The Corrections, like Colson Whitehead’s novel John Henry Days, teaches a circuitous reverence for an annoying, burdensome father whose passion is the building and maintenance of the railroads, along with the maintenance of the memory of how they were built. These novels identify the father with the infrastructure, and love for the father (which is not easy) with a carrying on of the father’s strange passion for public utilities as a sort of “built heritage.”

Infrastructure again intersects with love, this time in the more directly erotic sense, in Milan Kundera’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being: “Toi-

lets in modern water closets rise up from the floor like white water lilies. The architect does all he can to make the body forget how paltry it is, and to make man ignore what happens to his intestinal wastes after the water from the tank flushes them down the drain. Even though the sewer pipelines reach far into our houses with their tentacles, they are carefully hidden from view, and we are happily ignorant of the invisible Venice of shit underlying our bathrooms, bedrooms, dance halls, and parliaments." Aside from his possible allusion to Calvino’s *Invisible Cities,* which also pauses over plumbing, why does Kundera remind us of this Venice of shit? Perhaps in order to explain how love happens. The plumbing of Soviet-era Central Europe, Kundera suggests, is not “modern.” Openly and anti-aesthetically utilitarian, Soviet plumbing wants to make us aware that we hover over a Venice of shit. In this passage, Tereza has gone to the toilet after an experiment in making love with someone she doesn’t love, and who may be an agent of the Soviet-controlled government. Kundera tells us that this toilet, in a working-class building, “did not look like a water-lily; it looked like what it was: the enlarged end of a sewer pipe” (156). Does Kundera want us to forget, or to remember, that our toilets are extensions of sewers? Communism is so respectful toward its public utilities because it wants everything to be public; it wants to erase the very possibility of privacy. Reducing us to our material common denominator, it wants us to be conscious of our relation to the sewer. Kundera, on the other hand, defends privacy and freedom. Yet his explanation of how love happens takes precisely the totalitarian position. What triggers love is submitting to the involuntary humiliations of bodily necessity. Tomas falls in love with Tereza when he hears her stomach rumble. And now we are told that, perched naked and miserable “on the enlarged end of a sewer pipe” (157), Tereza is again on the brink of falling in love. (You might say she is saved from sewer-love only by the double standard: Tomas’s sexual rivals never prosper.) Kundera’s commitment to “Western” values like privacy and good plumbing seems to be undercut, on the erotic level, by an opposite commitment, less Marxist than totalitarian: a commitment to love as a recognition of excremental necessity. Or perhaps

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this is the paradox faced by anyone who pays attention to plumbing, rather than using and forgetting it. In making us conscious of a technology that ordinarily conceals the consequences of our bodily dependence, it undoes plumbing’s work, reminds us of the bodily dependence, makes the consequences visible again. If so, one has to wonder what utility there might be in the description of utilitarian infrastructure. Is love the recognition of necessity?

The ambiguous association of plumbing with necessity and its equally ambiguous consequences for conjugal love considered as a social microcosm are also themes of Virginia Woolf’s London sketches, reprinted as *The London Scene*. After a visit to the house of Thomas and Jane Carlyle, Woolf writes, “One hour spent in 5 Cheyne Row will tell us more about them and their lives than we can learn from all the biographies. Go down into the kitchen. There, in two seconds, one is made acquainted with a fact that escaped the attention of Froude, and yet was of incalculable importance—they had no water laid on. Every drop that the Carlyles used . . . had to be pumped by hand from a well in the kitchen . . . here is the cracked yellow tin bath, so deep and so narrow, which had to be filled with the cans of hot water that the maid first pumped and then boiled and then carried up three flights of stairs from the basement” (23–24). In Woolf’s eyes, to have or not to have indoor plumbing is not a trifle. She ends the portrait of Jane Welsh Carlyle’s bitterness and suffering by saying, “Such is the effect of a pump in the basement and a yellow tin bath up three pairs of stairs” (25). “It is impossible not to believe that half of their quarrels might have been spared and their lives immeasurably sweetened if only number 5 Cheyne Row had possessed, as the house agents put it, bath, h. and c., gas fires in the bedroom, all modern conveniences and indoor sanitation” (26).

This consequential view of modern conveniences seems a firm feminist answer to Matthew Arnold and his masculine anti-utilitarianism. Yet Woolf herself seems very up in the air about where the consequences are felt—that is, by whom they are felt—and thus how much after all is to be gained from the modern conveniences. She reminds us that it’s the maid

who, without plumbing, carried the cans of water up from the basement. Yet when she says that “[t]he voice of the house . . . is the voice of pumping and scrubbing, of coughing and groaning” (24), the maid and the mistress are run together. We’ve been told that the pumping is the maid’s, but the groaning seems to belong exclusively to Jane Carlyle, as does the conjugal union that would have been spared so many quarrels. Are there any consequences for the maid? Against her will, Woolf seems to be making Williams’s point that “physical comforts” will not after all alleviate “the sufferings of the great mass of the people.”

Public utilities drop off the radar because they seem to constitute a minimum threshold, an earth-bound zone in which the large irresolutions of politics can for once be ignored and decisions safely left to the technocrats. Indeed, public utilities are often figures for a desired political minimalism, as in Pound: “Some one ought to be employed to look after our traffic and sewage, one grants that. But a superintendence of traffic and sewage is not the sole function of man. Certain stupid and honest people should, doubtless, be delegated for the purpose. There politics ends [for] the enlightened man.” Yet there has never been a moment when everyone possessed such public goods as access to clean water and efficient sewers. These are, as they have been, objects of political struggle. The modernists were part of that struggle. As the Woolf passage reminds us, modernism helped bring us the welfare state, and it is not rare for modernism’s structural experiments to refer, if that is the right verb, to infrastructure, finding ways to denaturalize and revalue our taken-for-granted conveniences. Consider how Joyce’s *Ulysses* experiments with extreme impersonality in its famous Ithaka episode. Bloom, intent on filling his teapot and making tea, turns the faucet. Here, for once, nothing at all is taken for granted. We must be told that the water flows; we must be told where it flows from. “Did it flow? Yes. From Roundwood reservoir in county Wicklow. . . .” These conveniences are in fact products of invisible effort; they are more mysterious than they appear. In Henry Roth’s Joycean novel *Call It Sleep*, the same mystery is attached to the consciousness of a thirsty child, too short to reach the distant tap and too small to understand where water comes from in the “strange world . . . hidden behind the walls of a house.”

As Michael Rubenstein reads the Ithaka question-and-answer pas-

sage, it turns on a conflict over water rights between “paupers” and “self-supporting taxpayers.” Infrastructural passages tend in fact to foreground just that conflict that they might seem privileged to evade, if only by their triviality. Raymond Queneau’s book *Exercices de style* describes a brief encounter on a bus—describes it ninety-nine times, in ninety-nine distinct styles. The scene is “about,” if that’s the right word, what it’s like to ride when the bus is crowded and, as passengers try to get on or off, people bump into each other and sometimes get angry. The moral seems to be that something so utterly unimportant can only serve as the object of a stylistic exercise. The novelist or writer can take this material as an occasion for showing off his stylistic virtuosity because in itself it is so trivial. Yet the Queneau text also invites more sympathetic analysis by virtue of its place within a motif, beginning with scenes in Dickens and Horatio Alger, of fighting on and over public transport.

Infrastructure needs to be made visible, of course, in order to see how our present landscape is the product of past projects, past struggles, past corruption—for example, how public transport lost out to the private automobile only because tax dollars were diverted to roads, effectively lowering the price of cars. But we also need to make infrastructure visible as a guide to the struggles of the present. By arguing that public utilities should be available to all, whether or not all are capable of paying for them, we can perhaps make them into a materialist version of the politics of human rights, to be demanded with absolute urgency because or to the extent that we can agree that they are indeed an absolute minimum.

Infrastructure is a heritage of which we are usually unconscious until it malfunctions. If we contemplate architecture, as the saying goes, in a state of distraction, some still stronger word is needed for the absence of mind characteristic of our usual relation to public utilities. When I suggest that attention should be paid, I am not recommending a continuous and exhausting gratitude that would defeat the technology’s mind- and labor-saving purpose while also distracting us from other purposes. Public regu-

16. I would love to lay claim to the motif of buses and trams in Kazuo Ishiguro, but I’m afraid it’s public property.
17. A classic of this genre as applied to the history of water is the Roman Polanski film *Chinatown*. 
lation of utilities that are necessary to life is one of the explicit demands of the recent alter-globalization movement, which has brought a welcome renovation of the concept of the commons. There is no good reason why humanists and posthumanists should not be part of this. It does not entail a simple politics likely to bore the theoretically sophisticated, unworthy of our discipline’s complex analytic and rhetorical skills. On the contrary.

Consider, as a concluding if not conclusive example, how Jamaica Kincaid addresses a potential tourist in *A Small Place*: “You must not wonder what exactly happened to the contents of your lavatory when you flushed it. You must not wonder where your bathwater went when you pulled out the stopper. You must not wonder what happened when you brushed your teeth. Oh, it might all end up in the water you are thinking of taking a swim in; the contents of your lavatory might, just might, graze gently against your ankle as you wade carefree in the water, for you see, in Antigua, there is no proper sewage disposal system.”

Along with the line separating those who do and don’t have easily affordable access to clean water, the line between those who have and those who don’t have a proper sewage disposal system is arguably the most important political line in the world today. Yet to allow Kincaid to condemn tourists for not following out the course of their excrement is, I would argue, to show insufficient respect for public utilities as an absolute good, however unjustly distributed. It cannot be our goal to have all those who benefit from indoor plumbing, wherever mobile or stationary, spend their time thinking about where the contents of their lavatories go after they flush. Not to have to follow out such chains of causality is a legitimate political goal, and thus cannot properly be called a form of fetishism. Respect for public utilities, which function to distract us from some of our bodily necessities as well as to provide for these and others, thus cuts against the literary-critical penchant for pursuing all hidden consequences to the point where they graze our ankles. One way of recognizing necessity is to include among our political goals that of ensuring that the privilege of not following out all causal chains is more widely shared.

*Bruce Robbins*

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--Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique"

[Born in 1893, Victor Shklovsky was a leading figure in the school of literary and linguistic theory known as Russian formalism, which flourished at the time of the Russian Revolution. The two centers of activity were Moscow and St. Petersburg, where Shklovsky was the leader of the Opayaz group. This article, first published in 1917, was described by Boris Eikhenbaum, another member of the Opayaz group, as "a kind of manifesto of the Formalist Method."

The version I reproduce here, complete, was translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis in 1965, and is reprinted in David Lodge, ed., Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader (London: Longmans, 1988), pp. 16-30. I have not included the footnotes, but have put some footnote-type material in square brackets. All the parenthetical remarks are Shklovsky's.]

1. "Art is thinking in images." This maxim, which even high school students parrot, is nevertheless the starting point for the erudite philologist who is beginning to put together some kind of systematic literary theory. The idea, originated in part by Potebnya [leading figure in the Russian Symbolist school of poets and critics], has spread. "Without imagery there is no art, and in particular no poetry," Potebnya writes [in 1905]. And elsewhere, "Poetry, as well as prose, is first and foremost a special way of thinking and knowing."

2. Poetry is a special way of thinking; it is, precisely, a way of thinking in images, a way which permits what is generally called 'economy of mental effort,' a way which makes for a 'sensation of the relative ease of the process.' Aesthetic feeling is the reaction to this economy. This is how the academician Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky [a leading Russian scholar and literary conservative], who undoubtedly read the works of Potebnya attentively, almost certainly understood and faithfully summarized the ideas of his teacher. Potebnya and his numerous disciples consider poetry a special kind of thinking - thinking by means of images; they feel that the purpose of imagery is to help channel various objects and activities into groups and to clarify the unknown by means of the known. Or, as Potebnya wrote:

   The relationship of the image to way is being clarified is that: (a) the image is the fixed predicate of that which undergoes change - the unchanging means of attracting what is perceived as changeable. . . . (b) the image is far clearer and simpler than what it clarifies.

   In other words:

   Since the purpose of imagery is to remind us, by approximation, of those meanings for which the image stands, and since, apart from this, imagery is unnecessary for thought, we must be more familiar with the image than with what it clarifies.

3. It would be instructive to apply this principle to Tyutchev's comparison of summer lightning to deaf and dumb demons or to Gogol's comparison of the sky to the garment of God. [The reference is to 19th-c. Russian writers known for their bold use of imagery.]

4. "Without imagery there is no art" - "Art is thinking in images." These maxims have led to far-fetched interpretations of individual works of art. Attempts have been made to evaluate even music, architecture, and lyric poetry as imagistic thought. After a
quarter of a century of such attempts Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky finally had to assign lyric poetry, architecture, and music to a special category of imageless art and to define them as lyric arts appealing directly to the emotions. And thus he admitted an enormous area of art which is not a mode of thought. A part of this area, lyric poetry (narrowly considered), is quite like the visual arts; it is also verbal. But, much more important, visual art passes quite imperceptibly into nonvisual art; yet our perceptions of both are similar.

5. Nevertheless, the definition "Art is thinking in images," which means (I omit the usual middle terms of the argument) that art is the making of symbols, has survived the downfall of the theory which supported it. It survives chiefly in the wake of Symbolism, especially among the theorists of the Symbolist movement.

6. Many still believe, then, that thinking in images - thinking in specific scenes of "roads and landscape" and furrows and boundaries" [the reference is to a major work of Symbolist theory, by the critic V. Ivanov] - is the chief characteristic of poetry. Consequently, they should have expected the history of "imagistic art," as they call it, to consist of a history of changes in imagery. But we find that images change little; from century to century, from nation to nation, from poet to poet, they flow on without changing. Images belong to no one; they are "the Lord's." The more you understand an age, the more convinced you become that the images a given poet used and which you though his own were taken almost unchanged from another poet. The works of poets are classified or grouped according to the new techniques that poets discover and share, and according to their arrangement and development of the resources of language; poets are much more concerned with arranging images than with creating them. Images are given to poets; the ability to remember them is far more important than the ability to create them.

7. Imagistic thought does not, in any case, include all the aspects of art nor even all the aspects of verbal art. A change in imagery is not essential to the development of poetry. We know that frequently an expression is thought to be poetic, to be created for aesthetic pleasure, although actually it was created without such intent - e.g., Annensky's opinion that the Slavic languages are especially poetic and Andrey Bely's ecstasy over the technique of placing adjectives after nouns, a technique used by eighteenth-century poets [references are to critics in Potebnya's group]. Bely joyfully accepts the technique as something artistic, or more exactly as intended, if we consider intention as art. Actually, this reversal of the usual adjective-noun order is a peculiarity of the language (which had been influenced by Church Slavonic). Thus a work may be (1) intended as prosaic and accepted as poetic, or (2) intended as poetic and accepted as prosaic. This suggests that the artistry attributed to a given work results from the way we perceive it. By 'works of art,' in the narrow sense, we mean works created by special techniques designed to make the works as obviously artistic as possible.

8. Potebnya's conclusion, which can be formulated 'poetry equals imagery,' gave rise to the whole theory that 'imagery equals symbolism,' that the image may serve as the invariable predicate of various subjects. (This conclusion, because it expressed ideas similar to the theories of the Symbolists, intrigued some of their leading representatives - Andrey Bely, Merezhkovsky and his 'eternal companions' and, in fact, formed the basis of the theory of Symbolism. [Shklovsky's aside]) The conclusion stems partly from the fact that Potebnya did not distinguish between the language of poetry and the language of prose. Consequently, he ignored the fact that there are two aspects of imagery: imagery as a practical means of thinking, as a means of placing objects within categories; and imagery as poetic, as a means of reinforcing an impression. I shall clarify with an example. I want to attract the
attention of a young child who is eating bread and butter and getting the butter on her fingers. I call, "Hey, butterfingers!" This is a figure of speech, a clearly prosaic trope. Now a different example. The child is playing with my glasses and drops them. I call, "Hey, butterfingers!" This figure of speech is a poetic trope. (In the first example, 'butterfingers' is metonymic; in the second, metaphoric - but this is not what I want to stress [Shklovsky's aside]. [Evidently, the Russian word for 'butterfingers' allows for word play involving a root that also means 'hat' and 'clumsy oaf'.]

9. Poetic imagery is a means of creating the strongest possible impression. As a method it is, depending upon its purpose, neither more nor less effective than other poetic techniques; it is neither more nor less effective than ordinary or negative parallelism, comparison, repetition, balanced structure, hyperbole, the commonly accepted rhetorical figures, and all those methods which emphasize the emotional effect of an expression (including words or even articulated sounds). But poetic imagery only externally resembles either the stock imagery of fables and ballads or thinking in images - e.g., the example in Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky's *Language and Art* in which a little girl calls a ball a watermelon. Poetic imagery is but one of the devices of poetic language. Prose imagery is a means of abstraction: a little watermelon instead of a lampshade, or a little watermelon instead of a head, is only the abstraction of one of the object's characteristics, that of roundness. It is no different from saying that the head and the melon are both round. This is what is meant, but it has nothing to do with poetry.

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10. The law of the economy of creative effort is also generally accepted. [The British philosopher Herbert] Spencer wrote:

> 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. . . . Hence, carrying out the metaphor that language is the vehicle of thought, there seems reason to think that in all cases the friction and inertia of the 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. [1882]

And R[ichard] Avenarius:

> If a soul possess inexhaustible strength, then, of course, it would be indifferent to how much might be spent from this inexhaustible source; only the necessarily expended time would be important. But since its forces are limited, one is led to expect that the soul hastens to carry out the apperceptive process as expeditiously as possible - that is, with comparatively the least expenditure of energy, and, hence, with comparatively the best result.

Petrazhitsky, with only one reference to the general law of mental effort, rejects [William] James's theory of the physical basis of emotion, a theory which contradicts his own. Even Alexander Veselovsky acknowledged the principle of the economy of creative effort, a theory especially appealing in the study of rhythm, and agreed with Spencer: "A satisfactory style is precisely that style which delivers the greatest amount of thought in the fewest words." And Andrey Bely, despite the fact that in
his better pages he gave numerous examples of 'roughened' rhythm and (particularly in the examples from Baratynsky) showed the difficulties inherent in poetic epithets, also thought it necessary to speak of the law of the economy of creative effort in his book - a heroic effort to create a theory of art based on unverified facts from antiquated sources, on his vast knowledge of the techniques of poetic creativity, and on Krayevich's high school physics text.

11. These ideas about the economy of energy, as well as about the law and aim of creativity, are perhaps true in their application to 'practical' language: they were, however, extended to poetic language. Hence they do not distinguish properly between the laws of practical language and the laws of poetic language. The fact that Japanese poetry has sounds not found in conversational Japanese was hardly the first factual indication of the differences between poetic and everyday language. Leo Jakubinsky has observed that the law of the dissimulation of liquid sounds does not apply to poetic language. This suggested to him that poetic language tolerated the admission of hard-to-pronounce conglomerations of similar sounds. In his article, one of the first examples of scientific criticism, he indicates inductively the contrast (I shall say more about his point later) between the laws of poetic language and the laws of practical language. [Jakubinsky, a Russian linguist, wrote the articles to which Shklovsky refers in 1916 and 1917.]

12. We must, then, speak about the laws of expenditure and economy in poetic language not on the basis of an analogy with prose, but on the basis of the laws of poetic language.

13. If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic; if one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, he will agree with us. Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed. In this process, ideally realized in algebra, things are replaced by symbols. Complex words are not expressed in rapid speech; their initial sounds are barely perceived. Alexander Pogodin [in a 1913 work] offers the example of a boy considering the sentence "The Swiss mountains are beautiful" in the form of a series of letters: $T, S, m, a, b$.

14. This characteristic of thought not only suggests the method of algebra, but even prompts the choice of symbols (letters, especially initial letters). By this 'algebraic' method of thought 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. We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette. The object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten. Such perception explains why we fail to hear the prose word in its entirety (see Leo Jakubinsky's article) and, hence, why (along with other slips of the tongue) we fail to pronounce it. The process of 'algebrization,' the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. Either objects are assigned only one proper feature - a number, for example - or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition.

I was cleaning a room and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn't remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious, I could not remember and felt...
that it was impossible to remember - so that if I had dusted it and forgot - that is, had acted unconsciously, then it was the same as if I had not. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been. [Leo Tolstoy's *Diary*, 1897]

15. And so life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. "If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been." 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.* [This key statement has been translated different ways; Robert Scholes, for instance, renders it as: *In art, it is our experience of the process of construction that counts, not the finished product.*]

16. The range of poetic (artistic) work extends from the sensory to the cognitive, from poetry to prose, from the concrete to the abstract: from Cervantes' *Con Quixote* - scholastic and poor nobleman, half consciously bearing his humiliation in the court of the duke - to the broad but empty Don Quixote of Turgenev, from Charlemagne to the name 'king' [in Russian, 'Charles' and 'king' derive from the same root, korol']. The meaning of a work broadens to the extent that artfulness and artistry diminish; thus a fable symbolizes more than a poem, and a proverb more than a fable. Consequently, the least self-contradictory part of Potebnya's theory is his treatment of the fable, which, from his point of view, he investigated thoroughly. But since his theory did not provide for 'expressive' works of art, he could not finish his book. As we know, *Notes on the Theory of Literature* was published in 1905, thirteen years after Potebnya's death. Potebnya himself completed only the section on the fable.

17. After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it - hence, we cannot say anything significant about it. Art removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways. Here I want to illustrate a way used repeatedly by Leo Tolstoy, that writer who, for Merezhkovsky at least, seems to present things as if he himself say them, and saw them in their entirety, and did not alter them.

18. Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects. 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 on their bottoms with switches," and, after a few lines, "to lash about on the naked buttocks." Then he remarks:

   Just why precisely this stupid, savage means of causing pain and not any other - why not prick the shoulders or any part of the body with needles, squeeze the hands or the feet in a vise, or anything like that?

I apologize for this harsh example, but it is typical of Tolstoy's way of pricking the
conscience. The familiar act of flogging is made unfamiliar both by the description and by the proposal to change its form without changing its nature. Tolstoy uses this technique of 'defamiliarization' constantly. The narrator of "Kholstomer," for example, is a horse, and it is the horse's point of view (rather than a person's) that makes the content of the story seem unfamiliar. Here is how the horse regards the institution of private property:

I understand well what they said about whipping and Christianity. But then I was absolutely in the dark. What's the meaning of 'his own,' 'his colt'? From these phrases I saw that people thought there was some sort of connection between me and the stable. At the time I simply could not understand the connection. Only much later, when they separated me from the other horses, did I begin to understand. But even then I simply could not see what it meant when they called me 'man's property.' The words 'my horse' referred to me, a living horse, and seemed as strange to me as the words 'may land,' 'my air,' 'my water.'

But the words made a strong impression on me. I thought about them constantly, and only after the most diverse experiences with people did I understand, finally, what they meant. They meant this: In life people are guided by words, not by deeds. It's not so much that they love the possibility of doing or not doing something as it is the possibility of speaking with words, agreed on among themselves, about various topics. Such are the words 'my' and 'mine,' which they apply to different things, creatures, objects, and even to land, people, and horses. They agree that only one may say 'mine' about his, that, or the other thing. And the one who says 'mine' about the greatest number of things is, according to the game which they're agreed to among themselves, the one they consider the most happy. I don't know the point of all this, but it's true. For a long time I tried to explain it to myself in terms of some kind of real gain, but I had to reject that explanation because it was wrong.

Many of those, for instance, who called me their own never rode on me - although others did. And so with those who fed me. Then again, the coachman, the veterinarians, and the outsiders in general treated me kindly, yet those who called me their own did not. In due time, having widened the scope of my observations, I satisfied myself that the notion 'my,' not only in relation to horses, has no other basis than a narrow human instinct which is called a sense of or right to private property. A man says 'this house is mine' and never lives in it; he only worries about its construction and upkeep. A merchant says 'my shop,' 'my dry goods shop,' for instance, and does not even wear clothes made from the better cloth he keeps in his own shop.

There are people who call a tract of land their own, but they never set eyes on it and never take a stroll on it. There are people who call others their own, yet never see them. And the whole relationship between them is that the so-called 'owners' treat the others unjustly.

There are people who call women their own, or their 'wives,' but their women live with other men. And people strive not for the good in life, but for goods they can call their own.

I am now convinced that this is the essential difference between people
and ourselves. And therefore, not even considering the other ways in which we are superior, but considering just this one virtue, we can
bravely claim to stand higher than men on the ladder of living creatures.
The actions of men, at least those with whom I have had dealings, are
guided by words -- ours, by deeds.

19. The horse is killed before the end of the story, but the manner of the narrative, its
technique, does not change:

Much later they put Serpukhovsky's body, which had experienced the
world, which had eaten and drunk, into the ground. They could
profitably send neither his hide, nor his flesh, nor his bones anywhere.

But since his dead body, which had gone about in the world for twenty
years, was a great burden to everyone, its burial was only a superfluous
embarrassment for the people. For a long time no one had needed him;
for a long time he had been a burden on all. But nevertheless, the dead
who buried the dead found it necessary to dress this bloated body,
which immediately began to rot, in a good uniform and good boots; to
lay it in a good new coffin with new tassels at the four corners, then to
place this new coffin in another of lead and ship it to Moscow; there to
exhume ancient bones and at just that spot, to hide this putrefying body,
swarming with maggots, in its new uniform and clean boots, and to
cover it over completely with dirt.

Thus we see that at the end of the story Tolstoy continues to use the technique even
though the motivation for it [the reason for its use] is gone.

20. In War and Peace Tolstoy uses the same technique in describing whole battles as if
battles were something new. These descriptions are too long to quote; it would be
necessary to extract a considerable part of the four-volume novel. but Tolstoy uses
the same method in describing the drawing room and the theater:

The middle of the stage consisted of flat boards; by the sides stood
painted pictures representing trees, and at the back a linen cloth was
stretched down to the floor boards. Maidens in red bodices and white
skirts sat on the middle of the stage. One, very fat, in a white silk dress,
sat apart on a narrow bench to which a green pasteboard box was glued
from behind. They were all singing something. When they had finished,
the maiden in white approached the prompter's box. A man in silk with
tight-fitting pants on his fat legs approached her with a plume and began
to sing and spread his arms in dismay. The man in the tight pants
finished his song alone; they the girl sang. After that both remained
silent as the music resounded; and the man, obviously waiting to begin
singing his part with her again, began to run his fingers over the hand of
the girl in the white dress. They finished their song together, and
everyone in the theater began to clap and shout. But the men and women
on stage, who represented lovers, started to bow, smiling and raising
their hands.

In the second act there were pictures representing monuments and
openings in the linen cloth representing the moonlight, and they raised
lamp shades on a frame. As the musicians started to play the bass horn
and counter-bass, a large number of people in black mantles poured onto
the stage from right and left. The people, with something like daggers in
their hands, started to wave their arms. Then still more people came running out and began to drag away the maiden who had been wearing a white dress but who now wore one of sky blue. They did not drag her off immediately, but sang with her for a long time before dragging her away. Three times they struck on something metallic behind the scenes, and everyone got down on his knees and began to chant a prayer. Several times all of this activity was interrupted by enthusiastic shouts from the spectators.

The third act is described:

But suddenly a storm blew up. Chromatic scales and chords of diminished sevenths were heard in the orchestra. Everyone ran about and again they dragged one of the bystanders behind the scenes as the curtain fell.

In the fourth act, "There was some sort of devil who sang, waving his hands, until the boards were moved out from under him and he dropped down."

21. In *Resurrection* Tolstoy describes the city and the court in the same way; he uses a similar technique in "Kreutzer Sonata" when he describes marriage - "Why, if people have an affinity of souls, must they sleep together?" But he did not defamiliarize only those things he sneered at:

Pierre stood up from his new comrades and made is way between the campfires to the other side of the road where, it seemed, the captive soldiers were held. He wanted to talk with them. The French sentry stopped him on the road and ordered him to return. Pierre did so, but not to the campfire, not to his comrades, but to an abandoned, unharnessed carriage. On the ground, near the wheel of the carriage, he sat cross-legged in the Turkish fashion, and lowered his head. He sat motionless for a long time, thinking. More than an hour passed. No one disturbed him. Suddenly he burst out laughing with his robust, good natured laugh - so loudly that the men near him looked around, surprised at his conspicuously strange laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed Pierre. And he began to talk to himself. "The soldier didn't allow me to pass. They caught me, barred me. Me - me - my immortal soul. Ha, ha, ha," he laughed with tears starting in his eyes.

Pierre glanced at the sky, into the depths of the departing, playing stars. "And all this is mine, all this is in me, and all this is I," thought Pierre. "And all this they caught and put in a planked enclosure." He smiled and went off to his comrades to lie down to sleep.

22. Anyone who knows Tolstoy can find several hundred such passages in his work. His method of seeing things out of their normal context is also apparent in his last works. Tolstoy described the dogmas and rituals he attacked as if they were unfamiliar, substituting everyday meanings for the customarily religious meanings of the words common in church ritual. Many persons were painfully wounded; they considered it blasphemy to present as strange and monstrous what they accepted as sacred. Their reaction was due chiefly to the technique through which Tolstoy perceived and reported his environment. And after turning to what he had long avoided, Tolstoy found that his perceptions had unsettled his faith.
23. The technique of defamiliarization is not Tolstoy's alone. I cited Tolstoy because his work is generally known.

24. Now, having explained the nature of this technique, let us try to determine the approximate limits of its application. I personally feel that defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found. In other words, the difference between Potebnya's point of view and ours is this: 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.

25. The purpose of imagery in erotic art can be studied even more accurately; an erotic object is usually presented as if it were seen for the first time. Gogol, in "Christmas Eve," provides the following example:

Here he approached her more closely, coughed, smiled at her, touched her plump, bare arm with his fingers, and expressed himself in a way that showed both his cunning and his conceit.

"And what is this you have, magnificent Solokha?" and having said this, he jumped back a little.

"What? An arm, Osip Nikiforovich!" she answered.

"Hmm, an arm! He, he, he!" said the secretary cordially, satisfied with his beginning. He wandered about the room.

"And what is this you have, dearest Solokha?" he said in the same way, having approached her again and grasped her lightly by the neck, and in the very same way he jumped back.

"As if you don't see, Osip Nikiforovich!" answered Solokha, "a neck, and on my neck a necklace!"

"Hmm! On the neck a necklace! He, he, he!" and the secretary again wandered about the room, rubbing his hands.

"And what is this you have, incomparable Solokha?" . . . It is not known to what the secretary would stretch his long fingers now.

And Knut Hamsun has the following in "Hunger": "Two white prodigies appeared from beneath her blouse."

26. Erotic subjects may also be presented figuratively with the obvious purpose of leading us away from their 'recognition.' Hence sexual organs are referred to in terms of lock and key or quilting tools or bow and arrow, or rings and marlinspikes, as in the legend of Stavyor, in which a married man does not recognize his wife, who is disguised as a warrior. She proposes a riddle:

"Remember, Stavyor, do you recall
How we little ones walked to and fro in the street?
You and I together sometimes played with a marlinspike --
You had a silver marlinspike,
But I had a gilded ring?
I found myself at it just now and then,
But you fell in with it ever and always."
Says Stavyor, son of Godinovich,
"What! I didn't play with you at marlinspikes!"
Then Vasilisa Mikulichna: "So he says.
Do you remember, Stavyor, do you recall,
Now must you know, you and I together learned to read and write;
Mine was an ink-well of silver,
And yours a pen of gold?
But I just moistened it a little now and then,
And I just moistened it ever and always."

In a different version of the legend we find a key to the riddle:

Here the formidable enjoy Vasilyushka
Raised her skirts to the very navel,
And then the young Stavyor, son of Godinovich,
Recognized her gilded ring . . .

27. But defamiliarization is not only the technique of the erotic riddle - a technique of euphemism - it is also the basis and point of all riddles. Every riddle pretends to show its subject either by words which specify or describe it but which, during the telling, do not seem applicable (the type "black and white and 'red' - read - all over") or by means of odd but imitative sounds ("Twas brillig, and the slithy toves/Did gyre and gimble in the wabe") [these examples are translators' substitutions for Shklovsky's Russian wordplay].

28. Even erotic images not intended as riddles are defamiliarized ("Boobies," "tarts," "piece," etc.). In popular imagery there is generally something equivalent to "trampling the grass" and "breaking the guelder-rose." The technique of defamiliarization is absolutely clear in the widespread image - a motif of erotic affectation - in which a bear and other wild beasts (or a devil, with a different reason for nonrecognition) do not recognize a man.

29. The lack of recognition in the following tale is quite typical:

A peasant was plowing a field with a piebald mare. A bear approached him and asked, "Uncle, what's made this mare piebald for you?"

"I did the piebalding myself."

"But how?"

"Let me, and I'll do the same for you."

The bear agreed. The peasant tied his feet together with a rope, took the ploughshare from the two-wheeled plough, heated it on the fire, and applied it to his flanks. He made the bear piebald by scorching his fur down to the hide with the hot ploughshare. The man untied the bear, which went off and lay down under a tree.

A magpie flew at the peasant to pick at the meat on his shirt. He caught her and broke one of her legs. The magpie flew off to perch in the same tree under which the bear was lying. Then, after the magpie, a horsefly
landed on the mare, sat down, and began to bite. The peasant caught the fly, took a stick, shoved it up its rear, and let it go. The fly went to the tree where the bear and the magpie were. There all three sat.

The peasant's wife came to bring his dinner to the field. The man and his wife finished their dinner in the fresh air, and he began to wrestle with her on the ground.

The bear saw this and said to the magpie and the fly, "Holy priests! The peasant wants to piebald someone again."

The magpie said, "No, he wants to break someone's legs."

The fly said, "No, he wants to shove a stick up someone's rump."

The similarity of technique here and in Tolstoy's "Kholstomer" [the horse narrator story] is, I think, obvious.

30. Quite often in literature the sexual act itself is defamiliarized: for example, the Decameron refers to "scraping out a barrel," "catching nightingales," "gay wool-beating work," (the last is not developed in the plot). Defamiliarization is often used in describing the sexual organs.

31. A whole series of plots is based on such a lack of recognition; for example, in Afanasyev's Intimate Tales the entire story of "The Shy Mistress" is based on the fact that an object is not called by its proper name - or, in other words, on a game of nonrecognition. So too in Onchukov's "Spotted Petticoats," tale no. 525, and also in "The Bear and the Hare" from Intimate Tales, in which the bear and the hare make a 'wound.'

32. Such constructions as "the pestle and the mortar," or "Old Nick and the infernal regions" (Decameron) are also examples of the technique of defamiliarization in psychological parallelism. Here, then, I repeat that the perception of disharmony in a harmonious context is important in parallelism. The purpose of parallelism, like the general purpose of imagery, is to transfer the usual perception of an object into the sphere of a new perception - that is, to make a unique semantic modification.

33. In studying poetic speech in its phonetic and lexical structure as well as in its characteristic distribution of words and in the characteristic thought structures compounded from the words, we find everywhere the artistic trademark - that is, we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception; the author's purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized perception. A work is created 'artistically' so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception. As a result of this lingering, the object is perceived not in its extension in space, but, so to speak, in its continuity. Thus "poetic language" gives satisfaction. According to Aristotle, poetic language must appear strange and wonderful; and, in fact, it is often called foreign: the Sumerian used by the Assyrians, the Latin of Europe during the Middle Ages, the Arabisms of the Persians, the Old Bulgarian of Russian literature, or the elevated, almost literary language of folk songs. The common archaisms of poetic language, the intricacy of the sweet new style [reference here is to Dante's dolce stil nuovo], the obscure style of the language of Arnaut Daniel with the "roughened" forms which make pronunciation difficult -- these are used in much the same way. Leo Jakubinsky has demonstrated the principle of phonetic 'roughening' of poetic language in the particular case of the repetition of identical sounds. The language of poetry is, then, a
difficult, roughened, impeded language. In a few special instances the language of poetry approximates the language of prose, but this does not violate the principle of 'roughened' form.

Her sister was called Tatyana.
For the first time we shall
Willfully brighten the delicate
Pages of a novel with such a name.

wrote Pushkin. The unusual poetic language for Pushkin's contemporaries was the elegant style of Dershavin [Russian writer with a more 'traditional' approach]; but Pushkin's style, because it seemed trivial then, was unexpectedly difficult for them. We should remember the consternation of Pushkin's contemporaries over the vulgarity of his expressions. He used the popular language as a special device for prolonging attention, just as his contemporaries generally used Russian words in their usually French speech (see Tolstoy's examples in War and Peace).

34. Just now a still more characteristic phenomenon is under way. Russian literary language, which was originally foreign to Russia, has so permeated the language of the people that it has blended with their conversation. On the other hand, literature has not begun to show a tendency towards the use of dialects (Remizov, Klyuyev, Essenin [the first is a satiric novelist, the last two are peasant poets], and others, so unequal in talent and so alike in language, are intentionally provincial) and of barbarisms (which gave rise to the Severyanin group [noted for opulent, sensuous style]). And currently Maxim Gorky is changing his diction from the old literary language to the new literary colloquialism of Leskov [who popularized the dialect-heavy skaz, 'sketch' or tale]. Ordinary speech and literary language have thereby changed places (see the work of Vyacheslav Ivanov and many others). And finally, a strong tendency, led by Khlebnikov, to create a new and properly poetic language has emerged. In the light of these developments we can define poetry as attenuated, tortuous speech. Poetic speech is formed speech. Prose is ordinary speech - economical, easy, proper, the goddess of prose is a goddess of the accurate, facile type, of the 'direct' expression of a child. I shall discuss roughened form and retardation as the general law of art at greater length in an article on plot construction.

35. Nevertheless, the position of those who urge the idea of the economy of artistic energy as something which exists in and even distinguishes poetic language seems, at first glance, tenable for the problem of rhythm. Spencer's description of rhythm would seem to be absolutely incontestable:

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 perspectives active enough to recognize the least easily caught sounds. And as, if the concussions recur in definite order, the body may husband its forces by adjusting the resistance needful for each concussion; so, if the syllables by rhythmically arranged, the mind may economize its energies by anticipating the attention required for each syllable.

This apparently conclusive observation suffers from the common fallacy, the confusion of the laws of poetic and prosaic language. In The philosophy of Style Spencer failed utterly to distinguish between them. But rhythm may have two functions. The rhythm of prose, or of a work song like "Dubinushka," permits the members of the work crew to do their necessary "groaning together" and also eases
the work by making it automatic. And, in fact, it is easier to march with music than without it, and to march during an animated conversation is even easier, for the walking is done unconsciously. Thus the rhythm of prose is an important automatizing element: the rhythm of poetry is not. There is 'order' in art, yet not a single column of a Greek temple stands exactly in its proper order; poetic rhythm is similarly disordered rhythm. Attempts to systematize the irregularities have been made, and such attempts are part of the current problem in the theory of rhythm. It is obvious that the systematization will not work, for unreality the problem is not of complicating the rhythm but of disordering the rhythm - a disordering which cannot be predicted. Should the disordering of rhythm become a convention, it would be ineffective as a device for the roughening of language. But I will not discuss rhythm in more detail since I intend to write a book about it. [Evidently, this intention was never fulfilled.]