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Independent Voices, New Perspectives

From Concept to Context

Robert Wood · Thursday, May 21st, 2015

Ordinary speech and literary language have changed places.

Viktor Shklovsky 'Art as Technique'

In thinking through Viktor Shklovsky's statement in relation to the poetry landscape today, I do not want to simply find evidence to support or oppose it. One could easily imagine an essay that listed the ways in which ordinary turns of phrase entered into the space of poems in blogs, journals, chapbooks, poems and books. For example: how might overheard snippets of speech enter into piece of verse (Tim Wright)? What might be the way in which the inheritors of Ezra Pound mash up everyday language into epics now (Joshua Corey *The Barons*)? What might letters to Kelly Clarkson look like (Julia Bloch)? We could focus, for example, on any number of conceptualists, who have re-framed ordinary speech to be literary language. Alternatively, we could also imagine a set of questions stemming from Shklovsky that were more theoretical: what constitutes ordinary speech? What are the boundaries of the literary? Haven't they always been mixed up with each other? What is the history of this relationship? This would be a socio-linguistic exercise as well as interact with speculative thought in literary theory more generally.

I want to approach Shklovsky's statement not only in conjunction with another work of Russian constructivist literary theory, but also as it relates to contemporary conceptual poetry. To begin with, however, we might examine the essay from which the epigraph comes, namely Shklovsky's 'Art as Technique'. Poetry, particularly in its avant garde iterations, has for the most part focused on defamiliarisation as it comes to our attention in this essay. It will be remembered, in the form of *ostranenie*, which Shklovsky used as a way to differentiate 'habitualisation' from art. We could think of habitualisation as automatic, assumed, naturalised, calcified and entrained to the degree that it is all but unconscious. For readers more familiar with Pierre Bourdieu, we could think of this as the *habitus* of representation. In contrast 'art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony'. This is to make one aware of the perception of things. This could mean becoming aware of the difficulty of language, the constructedness of language and gain with it an awareness of the processes causing them. Language here is recognisable as a surface, a network, a system of signs, not as a natural empty vehicle for expression. As a corollary: walking is one part of *habitus* and if one places a stone in the shoe, one recognises then that the stone is stony.

Poetry, especially that which defamiliarises, is important for Shklovsky in that it is 'difficult'. In citing an example of Tolstoy, Shklovsky writes 'the familiar act of flogging is made unfamiliar

both by the description and by the proposal to change its form without changing its nature....Anyone who knows Tolstoy can find several hundred such passages in his work.' Leaving aside how shocking flogging actually is, the technique does not belong to Tolstoy alone. For Shklovsky:

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 new perception – that is, to make a unique semantic modification.

Art 'de-automatises' perception. To quote again: 'A work is created "artistically" so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception... The language of, poetry is, then, a difficult, roughened, impeded language' This is despite the fact that Shklovsky observes that in his day 'ordinary speech and literary language have changed places'.

We can see traces of this thinking and the deployment of defamiliarisation and difficulty in work by various poets, including those associated with $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$. Defamiliarisation extends to the presence of foreign words in any given language, a technique that I do not think has exhausted its value in an Anglophone setting, particularly in regard to Indigenous material in North America and Australia. What is significant is that there is an emphasis on difficulty, on impeding perception so it slows down, so that one apprehends and notices language. In that sense, reading a poem takes longer than reading a newspaper of the same number of words.

Central to defamiliarisation is the context – 'disharmony in a harmonious context'. Recontextualisation as a process has been undertheorised. We need a poetics of it to think through certain issues that are prominent in poetry today. Recontextualisation might be thought of as reading the context rather than the text. It is a structural intervention that rests less on what the specific poem is doing than on the situation into which it is placed. The question might be asked thus: how can we create the conditions for a harmonious context rather than how do we promote disharmonic texts?

We could of course read what has been regarded as a conservative poem in a 'radical' environment and be meta-radical. Or we could re-perform certain language acts and be uncreatively creative. Or we could realise that the stone in the shoe is not enough to be a critique of the lack of ramps for wheelchairs. The point is that there is no universal new because each context determines what is old. Rather than poetry slowing one down, precisely because we struggle to cope with the onslaught of modern technologies like mass paperbacks, the radio and silent film or the internet, smartphones and tablets in our own day, perhaps we need poetry to respond in a site specific manner and hence change the conversation via recontextualisation.

However, in setting out a program for a poetry that is responsive and social, we might want to focus on the role of poetry in language. For that it is necessary, I think, to turn to metaphor. Critics from the left like Charles Bernstein to the right like Geoff Page have asserted that metaphor is poetry's essential gift to language. This is not to ascribe an implicit value to metaphor, but to recognise that it is socially situated.

Poetry is often regarded as metaphor. This is an essential and unmistakeable point from Jakobson's essay 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances'. Jakobson though is at pains to point out that both poetry and prose contain metaphor and metonymy. He also suggests

that metonymy has been less studied in poetics. I think that is still the case, which might be why ‘Two Aspects of Language’ retains its place on comparative literature syllabi in graduate schools, and which helps explain some of its enduring power.

Jakobson’s words on metonymy seem most appropriate when we think of conceptual poetry. Conceptual poetry is, of course, not replete with metaphors. It is not though framed as ordinary language – it is a kind of extraordinary ordinary language by virtue of its re-framing. By situating say a old novel as poetry we have shifted our frame. This is not only about defamiliarisation, it is about the use of a particular technique that enables recontextualisation. We could suggest that the conceptual is meta-metonymic – it makes a comment on metonymic language not by turning to metaphor but by framing metonymy to be poetic. In this it undermines our expectations of poetry as essentially metaphoric. And that may help explain why people are so reluctant to read it as poetry, to allow it into Poetry’s ecology.

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