

Tolstoy against Things: Ostranenie, Pragmatic Conversions and Natural Attitude

*Tolstói contra as coisas:
ostranenie, conversões
pragmáticas e atitude natural*

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Edição: RUS, Vol. 15. N° 26
Publicação: Maio de 2024
Recebido em: 30/04/2024
Aceito em: 06/05/2024

<https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2317-4765.rus.2024.224584>

POUSSON, Guilhem.
*Tolstoy against Things: Ostranenie,
Pragmatic Conversions and Natural Attitude.*
RUS, São Paulo, v. 15, n. 26, pp. 29-59, 2024.



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*Guilhem Pousson**

Abstract: The article discusses Viktor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) from a broad perspective, including criticisms of it, its contemporary ramifications and even parallels, such as the Brechtian *V-effekt*. The author then moves on to a broad approach of Lev Tolstoy's work from the perspective of the previous considerations regarding the shklovskian term, bringing to light various particularities of Tolstoyan poetics that tension Shklovsky's formulations.

Resumo: O artigo discute, a partir de uma perspectiva ampla, o conceito de estranhamento, (*ostranenie*) de Viktor Chklóvski, incluindo críticas a ele, suas ramificações contemporâneas e até mesmo seus paralelos com o procedimento brechtiano do *V-effekt*. O autor passa, então, a uma abordagem ampla da obra de Liev Tolstói sob a perspectiva das considerações anteriores a respeito do termo shklovskiano, trazendo à tona várias particularidades da poética tolstoiana que tensionam as formulações de Chklóvski.

Keywords: Viktor Shklovsky; Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy; Ostranenie

Palavras-chave: Viktor Chklóvski; Lev Nikoláievitch Tolstói; Ostranenie

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Introduced by Viktor Shklovsky in his famous article ‘Art a Technique’ [1990 (1917): 58–72], the notion of *ostranenie* has sparked a plethora of commentaries for over a century. The apparently limitless possibilities for exploration seem to be due in some extent to the polysemy of the word. No less than three distinct meanings can be identified in Shklovsky’s article [Jameson 1972:52-53; Spiegel 2008]. It can refer to:

(a) the effect of any artistic object insofar as it alters the usual mechanisms of perception. This performance of the work of art enables the reader to apprehend things visually (*videnie*), rather than seizing them as concepts (*uznavat’*).

(b) a literary device or set of devices used in the work to convey this effect.

(c) the historical driving force behind the renewal of artistic forms.

Shklovsky defines the technique of *ostranenie* (sense b) using examples from the prose of L. N. Tolstoy (*mettre le nom et les prénoms*). The critic defines this technique as...

The fact that 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 uses in the description of the thing not the accepted names of its parts, but calls them as the corresponding parts are called in other things. [Shklovsky 1990 (1917): 64]¹

Does this definition truly encapsulate the description of a literary technique? When Shklovsky contends that the designation of a thing ‘by its name’ is replaced by its description ‘as if seen for the first time’ (*kak v pervyj raz vidennuju*), he offers a psychological understanding of the process. This proposition suggests that *ostranenie* primarily entails the conveyance of a particular sentiment and is not inherently delineated by morphotextual characteristics. The allusion to an object being perceived ‘for the first time’ could potentially be substituted with other psychological states marked by a disruption of the symbolic order – such as trauma, which is accompanied by experiences sometimes described as ‘defamiliarizing’ [Ankersmit 2005: 306] or visual agnosia [Volpert 2007] – without elucidating our comprehension of the rhetorical devices that engendered this effect. This perspective leads us to encompass under the term *ostranenie* any kind of literary representations eliciting akin

¹ Прием остранения у Л. Толстого состоит в том, что он не называет вещь ее именем, а описывает ее, как в первый раз виденную, а случай – как в первый раз происшедший, при чем он употребляет в описании вещи не те названия ее частей, которые приняты, а называет их так, как называются соответственные части в других вещах.

effects, irrespective of the techniques used. Basing himself on such a definition, Carlo Ginzburg [2012] proficiently elucidated the genealogy of this effect, tracking its historical roots back to Antiquity and the Stoic representation of the body.

While it might present a coherent understanding of this word, such an approach diverts our attention from the analysis of the text itself and thus from the original formalist methodology. It also raises its own challenges. If *ostranenie* is construed as an impression or a feeling, the inquiry persists as to who experiences it. This prompts a potential dialogue between, on one hand, a cognitivist stance intrigued by the elicitation of this sentiment in the reader, its functional manifestations, addressing what Alexandra Berlina [2020] calls *extra-textual ostranenie*; and, on the other hand, narratology more focused on depictions of the interiority of fictional characters – akin to Darko Suvin’s inquiries [1979]. Furthermore, it is plausible that the choice between these methodologies is contingent upon the corpus and authorial intentions. Regarding Tolstoy, it would be pertinent to inquire into the ‘localization’ of these effects: do they pertain to the experience of a character (without precluding the possibility of such perception influencing the reader through identification with the fictional persona) or to the performativity intrinsic to the literary text itself?

Conversely, an inquiry focused on literary devices might find it prudent to eschew Shklovsky’s terminology, as it encompasses textual phenomena of considerable diversity. This ambiguity becomes apparent when we delve into the realm of techniques as such, as illustrated in the latter part of the definition: ‘to use in the description of the thing not the commonly accepted names of its parts, but to call them as the corresponding parts are called in other things.’ Here, the critic alludes to substitutionary figures employed in erotic poetry and charades. However, this specificity does not align well with Tolstoy, who exhibits caution towards metaphorical and imaginative devices [Gourfinkel 1949]. Furthermore, this precision inadvertently dilutes the originality of *ostranenie*, as initially remarked by Shklovsky, in an inflationary definition. Lachmann [1970] previously hinted at Shklovsky’s inclination to ‘equate any rhetorical or imaginal (*bildlich*) device with estrangement’.

The vagueness inherent in the definition, exacerbated by the proximity of the Brechtian notion of the *V-effekt* – the distinctions between which and *ostranenie* have been debated [Günther 2001 ; Robinson 2008] – accounts for the proliferation of translations in languages such as French: ‘singularisation’, ‘défamiliarisation’, ‘étrangisation’, ‘estrangement’. This profusion of terms has coincided with the overuse of the notion articulated by Shklovsky. For instance, Thomas Pavel appears to muddle the issue by defining ‘defamiliarisation’ as the inclusion of a ‘striking detail [...] selected for its insignificance’ that ‘draws attention’ to a

character or object, proposing to rename the process 'individuation' [2015: chapter XI]. What he describes aligns more closely with what Chudakov [1971:151] refers to as 'trifles' (*neznachimye podrobnosti*) in Chekhov's prose, which precisely serve to singularize the character.

Here, we encounter an important issue, already mentioned by Evgeniy Soshkin [2012]. If we use the term *ostranenie* to describe any process that makes something look 'different' (from what?), then we are including formal tricks that don't make it seem strange or make people pay attention to the *representamen* in a particular way. Ultimately, such a definition of the concept would render it an unhelpful synonym for 'literary shaping'. Sergey Zenkin recently cleared up some of this ambiguity by clarifying the notion of 'technique' (*priyom*) in formalist discourse. According to Zenkin, 'Russian theorists of the time (both formalist and non-formalist) showed little interest in tropes, namely, the discrete effects of discourse concentrated within isolated words. Instead, they preferred to examine either broader rhetorical figures or the pragmatic frameworks of literary utterances [Zenkin 2016: 91]. Thus, the notion of technique should be construed not merely as a rhetorical figure, but rather as a praxis capable of reshaping the literary representation of reality prevalent at a given historical juncture. While this kind of object seems more in line with what Shklovsky's calls *ostranenie*, the word still warrants further elucidation.

Although it doesn't introduce a clear concept, Shklovsky's initial definition does shed light on a particular aspect of Tolstoy's formal alterations that merits specific examination: the inclination 'not to call things by their names' but rather to 'depict' them. This observation, rather than the subsequent concept developed by Shklovsky, prompts two lines of inquiry for me.

Firstly, the question arises regarding the act of avoiding direct naming. What literary techniques are involved in 'not naming things directly'? What does this act of 'naming' encompass that Tolstoy seeks to avoid?

Secondly, attention is directed to the alternatives for direct naming. What do these 'depictions' that replace direct naming entail? What insights do they provide that are either more or less than mere naming?

To address these inquiries, I will start by dissecting the various strategies employed in the Tolstoy excerpts cited by Shklovsky in 'Art as Technique'. This preliminary analysis will prompt me to eschew the overly ambiguous term *ostranenie* and instead concentrate on one of the mechanisms used in this context: the transformation of things and concepts into actions. This process, labeled as *pragmatic conversion*, revolves around the transformation of nominal elements into verbal sequences.

Then, drawing from another body of works, I will show that these pragmatic conversions serve purposes beyond merely

eliciting a sense of strangeness. I propose to interpret these verbal conversions as a strategy for representing the world from an alternative ontological perspective, deemed more authentic by certain characters.

Furthermore, I will illustrate that the various worldviews expressed through pragmatic conversion are not randomly distributed. Indeed, Tolstoy appears to establish a correlation between these perspectives and the social positionality of his characters. A thing-oriented ontology seems to be typical of fictional beings integrated into the prevailing political and symbolic order, while an action-oriented ontology characterizes those positioned outside of this order.

Lastly, I will use a third set of texts to illustrate Tolstoy's endorsement of an action-oriented ontology and his advocacy for writing practices that align with such a world view. This contextualization will prompt us to contemplate the alethic significance of the process of pragmatic conversion in a deeper sense. According to Tolstoy, the world view they convey does not merely reflect situated viewpoints. They encapsulate a natural stance towards the world, which conflicts with social devices that aim to implement a 'thingist' portrayal of reality.

Ostranenie and Pragmatic Conversions

To start, I will demonstrate that the *ostranenie* effect, as identified by Šklovsky in 'Art as Technique', does not arise from a single device but rather from a combination of different literary strategies. The purpose here is not to unify these strategies, but merely to highlight the significant role played by pragmatic conversion processes in crafting this effect.

Šklovsky cites in his article the depiction of Pierre Bezukhov's captivity in the fourth part of *War and Peace*:²

Pierre got up and left his new companions, crossing between the campfires to the other side of the road where he had been told the common prisoners were stationed. He wanted to talk to them. On the road he was stopped by a French sentinel who ordered him back.

Pierre turned back, not to his companions by the campfire, but to an unharnessed cart where there was nobody. Tucking his legs under him and dropping his head, he sat down on the cold ground by the wheel of the cart and remained motionless a long while sunk in thought. Suddenly he burst out into a fit of his broad, good-natured laughter, so loud that men from various sides turned with surprise to see what this strange and evidently solitary laughter could mean [12 :105].³

² All quotations from Tolstoy's works are taken from the centenary edition comprising ninety volumes. The first number in square brackets indicates the volume, while the second denotes the page number. The translations belong to me.

This first example highlights the ambiguities of the term *ostranenie*. Part of the corpus of texts identified by Shklovsky does not correspond to the definition he gives of the process. In this scene, the sense of 'strangeness' doesn't stem from stylistic transformation aimed at reshaping one's representation of reality into another. It is rather a result of the external focalization (that of the other captives) that gives us no access to Pierre's inner self at a pivotal moment in his psychological journey. His laughter emerges in a tense situation without the rationale behind his behaviour being disclosed, rendering it as baffling for the reader as it is for the characters surrounding him. If we adhere strictly to the definition of *ostranenie* as the act of not naming things, it becomes challenging to perceive how this passage exemplifies *ostranenie* as a transformative technique. In that sense, this excerpt holds little significance for the analysis I am conducting here.

The novella *Kholstomer* offers an instance of a treatment of reality much closer to Shklovsky's seminal intuition. In this passage, the reader adopts the perspective of a horse endeavouring to explain the concept of ownership and the meaning of possessive adjectives: 'my', 'your', 'his', and so forth. Once again, the sense of strangeness is triggered by the perception of a character who looks at things from the outside.

The pedagogical gesture of the horse, aimed at a part of the discourse that the human reader uses without thinking – it is true less often in Russian, which has the prepositional turn *u menya yest'*⁴ – and, therefore, of an institution constituting the ground of the undiscussed presuppositions of human life, produces an effect of strangeness: what was taken for granted and 'natural' ceases to be so.

The horse begins by demonstrating that these words signify a connection (*svyaz'*) between a human and an object. This assertion constitutes the initial stage in rectifying the misconceptions ingrained within language. By allowing for the use of an adjective to modify a noun, grammar allows us to draw parallels between expressions such as 'the horse is piebald' and 'the horse is mine', thereby portraying ownership as an inherent

3 Пьер встал от своих новых товарищей и пошел между костров на другую сторону дороги, где, ему сказали, стояли пленные солдаты. Ему хотелось поговорить с ними. На дороге французский часовой остановил его и велел воротиться. [12 :105]. Пьер вернулся, но не к костру, к товарищам, а к отпряженной повозке, у которой никого не было. Он, поджав ноги и опустив голову, сел на холодную землю у колеса повозки и долго неподвижно сидел, думая. Прошло более часа. Никто не тревожил Пьера. Вдруг он захохотал своим толстым, добродушным смехом так громко, что с разных сторон с удивлением оглянулись люди на этот странный, очевидно-одинокий смех.

4 The novel does not entirely avoid the use of these possessive adjectives. Most of the time, the horse uses them to refer to his own bodily qualities (*moya pestrota*, *moya pегina*, and so forth.), which is in line with Tolstoy's thesis that real property is reduced to the attributes of the body. On a few occasions, however, the horse uses the possessive adjective to refer to his mother (*mat' moya*) or his stable (*moyè stoylo*).

attribute of the possessed object rather than as an expression of the relationship between the human and the object.

To illustrate that there is no 'genuine connection' between the human and the object and to imply the imaginary nature of this association, the horse embarks on the subsequent exercise: redefining the object based on the actions it encompasses.

Many of the men who, for instance, called me their horse, did not ride on me, but entirely different men rode on me. They themselves did not feed me, but entirely different people fed me. Again, it was not those who called me their horse who treated me kindly, but the coachman, the veterinary, and, as a general thing, outside men. [26 :20]⁵

The exercise of rephrasing the possessive adjective into a series of actions (and absence of actions) is highlighted here through a sequence of parallel constructions, characterized by their binary nature, which enables the juxtaposition of those who wield the power of designation and those who possess the use of the object. This restructuring – which may not always be accompanied by such a rhetorical device – is what we refer to as a form of 'pragmatic conversion'. At the textual level, this restructuring manifests itself as the conversion of content typically conveyed by a noun into content presented in the form of a sequence of verbs.

Shklovsky cites Serpukhovskiy's depiction of the corpse below:

Serpukhovskiy's dead body, which walked around the world, eating and drinking, was put into the ground much later. Neither skin, nor meat, nor bones were of any use. And as for 20 years his dead body, which was walking around the world, has been a great burden to everyone, the disposal of this body was only an additional unnecessary difficulty for people.

Shklovsky argues that this scene also exemplifies the *ostranenie* 'technique'. Without delving into the nature of the effect of this detached portrayal of the corpse, I simply want to observe that the technique of conversion is once again recognizable, albeit in a different manner and for a different purpose. The body is not described by adjectives, but by verbs in the active past participle form encapsulating micro-narratives of its past activities. This substitution of predication of attributes with depiction of actions prompts a reconsideration of our ontological classifications. For Tolstoy, describing what something is not merely involves naming or giving it qualities, but recounting the actions that constitute or have constituted their existence.

⁵ Многие из тех людей, которые меня, например, называли своей лошадей, не ездили на мне, но ездили на мне совершенно другие. Кормили меня тоже не они, а совершенно другие. Делали мне добро опять-таки не они – те, которые называли меня своей лошадей, а кучера, коновалы и вообще сторонние люди.

The article 'Shameful' implements a technique similar to the depiction of ownership in *Kholstomer*:

The supreme government of a huge Christian state, nineteen centuries after Christ, could think of nothing more useful, clever and moral to counteract law breaking than that the people who broke the laws, adults and sometimes old people, should be stripped bare, rolled on the floor and beaten on the arse with rods. [31 :277]⁶

In this instance, the sensation of unfamiliarity emerges from the convergence of two gaps: firstly, the incongruity between the moral attributes of the governing political body administering the penalty and the nature of the punishment meted out – a matter I shall set aside; secondly, the absence of a rationale justifying the sequence of crime and punishment. The process of pragmatic conversion, as previously alluded to, serves to underscore this absence.

Tolstoy initiates by dismantling the concept of punishment. The terms 'punishment' (*nakazaniye*) or justice/truth (*pravda*), which could serve to rationalize and domesticate the recounted events, are deliberately avoided. Instead, Tolstoy opts for the word 'counteraction' (*protivodeystviye*). This substitution implies that the penalty is merely an action – or rather, a reaction – and thus, from this standpoint, bears no essential distinction in essence from the transgressions it seeks to address. This mechanistic portrayal of the legal process undermines the symbolic underpinnings of state justice.

Then, the text proceeds to scrutinize this 'counteraction'. Tolstoy dissects it into a series of infinitive verbs: 'undress,' 'throw to the ground,' 'hit.' There is no indication of how these actions serve as a means of addressing transgressions. Instead, the three imperfective verbs portray the action as a process rather than an outcome. The deliberate avoidance of positioning this sequence at the conclusion, coupled with its enumeration that allows for the grammatical objects of the verbs to be forgotten over time, creates the impression of an 'absolutization' of the actions, accentuated by the use of infinitive forms. This technique underscores a fundamental disparity between what constitutes 'punishment' and the reader's spontaneous conception of it.

Similarly, the concept of crime – the term is absent from the text – undergoes a similar transformation. The text juxtaposes the notion of 'breaking the law' (*narusheniya zakonov*) with the

⁶ Высшее правительство огромного христианского государства, 19 веков после Христа, ничего не могло придумать более полезного, умного и нравственного для противодействия нарушениям законов, как то, чтобы людей, нарушавших законы, взрослых и иногда старых людей, оголять, валить на пол и бить прутьями по заднице.

actions of individuals who violate the laws (*lyudey, narushavshikh zakony*). The technique employed involves transitioning from a description that Šklovskij categorizes as a 'generalization' [Shklovsky 1990 (1920): 99] to a detailed portrayal of the actions performed. This transition constitutes part of an argumentative progression, leading from a state of misconceived perception to a clearer representation of reality.

This transformation is particularly notable in Russian, a language where the verbal noun seems to morphologically originate from the verb – unlike, for instance, classical Arabic, where grammatical terminology identifies the verbal noun as a 'source' (*maṣḍar*) of conjugable forms. Conversely, the latter seems to be a primary form from the perspective of linguistic evolution and, in this regard, a more genuine mode of designation. But more genuine for whom? It's crucial to acknowledge that this article is narrated from the standpoint of a homodiegetic narrator, indicating the author speaking publicly. Similar to the case of the horse, the sense of unfamiliarity stems from a subjective focus that grants us insight into his distinct perspective of experiencing the world through a linguistic alteration.

The opera scene in *War and Peace* is often cited as a quintessential example of *ostranenie*. Once again, this characterization may make sense if understood as the effects produced on the reader by immersion in the focus on Natasha Rostova. From a stylistic standpoint, however, it is challenging to isolate a single technique responsible for these effects. It seems more accurate to speak of a conjunction of converging strategies. Without claiming to enumerate them all, let us attempt to describe the overall operation of this effect to understand at which level the technique of pragmatic conversion intervenes.⁷

On the stage there were flat boards in the middle, painted cardboards representing trees on the sides, and a cloth stretched across the boards behind. In the middle of the stage sat maidens in red corsages and white skirts. One very fat girl, in a white silk dress, sat apart, on a low bench, to which a green cardboard was glued at the back. They were all singing something. When they had finished their song, the maiden in white went to the prompter's box and a man in tight silk trousers on thick legs, carrying a feather and a dagger, came up to her and began to sing and spread his hands. The man in the tight pantaloons sang one song, then she sang another. Then both fell silent, the music began to play, and the man began to run his fingers over the hand of the maiden in the white dress, evidently waiting

⁷ In the remainder of his article, Šklovskij discusses Acts III and IV of the opera attended by Nataša Rostova. These scenes exhibit their own set of peculiarities, employing other techniques that result in a sense of strangeness. Since my aim is not to provide a comprehensive inventory of the stylistic possibilities producing this effect, but rather, at this stage, to highlight their diversity and the role of pragmatic conversions, I will not subject these texts to analysis.

again for a beat to begin his part with her. They sang together, and everyone in the theatre began to clap and shout, and the man and the woman on the stage, who represented the lovers, began to bow, smiling and spreading their hands. [10 :318]⁸

Primarily, this paragraph employs a framing technique, beginning with a continuation from the preceding chapter's final sentence: 'Natasha began to look.' Here, the reader perceives what Natasha observes. The sentences aim for a detached portrayal of her visual field, devoid of accompanying emotions, which are only addressed in the subsequent paragraph. The scene's peculiarity lies in this window of dispassionate consciousness, balancing between internal and external perspectives.

Furthermore, the sense of strangeness arises from the absence of expected vocabulary typically associated with this context. Instead, the reader encounters descriptions referring to familiar objects through a denotative channel divergent from everyday linguistic norms. For instance, the phrase 'a theatre set' (never used in the text) could be substituted with 'painted cardboards' without changing the object referred to, yet it implies other denotations. 'Theatre set' conveys information about the object's purpose and context, while 'painted cardboard' highlights its materiality and construction method.

This shift in denotational mode, despite its disconcerting implications, prompts a sociological examination of language game and the hierarchy of permissible perspectives on reality, favouring certain viewpoints while marginalizing others based on a (so-called) relevance criterion. Notably, labelling theatrical scenery as 'painted cardboard' may be deemed insufficient by advocates of such spectacles, who argue that the material composition holds little significance compared to the symbolic performance it embodies.

For Tolstoy, this contention exposes the underlying assumptions of artists and audiences in his era, who conceive artworks as delineating a boundary between representational reality within the work and nonrepresentational reality beyond. However, rejecting this dichotomy extends beyond descriptive

⁸ На сцене были ровные доски посередине, с боков стояли крашенные картоны, изображавшие деревья, позади было протянуто полотно на досках. В середине сцены сидели девицы в красных корсажах и белых юбках. Одна, очень толстая, в шелковом белом платье, сидела особо, на низкой скамеечке, к которой был приклеен сзади зеленый картон. Все они пели что-то. Когда они кончили свою песню, девица в белом подошла к будочке суфлера и к ней подошел мужчина в шелковых в обтяжку панталонах на толстых ногах, с пером и кинжалом и стал петь и разводить руками. Мужчина в обтянутых панталонах пропел один, потом пропела она. Потом оба замолкли, заиграла музыка, и мужчина стал перебирать пальцами руку девицы в белом платье, очевидно выжидая опять такта, чтобы начать свою партию вместе с нею. Они пропели вдвоем, и все в театре стали хлопать и кричать, а мужчина и женщина на сцене, которые изображали влюбленных, стали, улыбаясь и разводя руками, кланяться.

discourse. By reducing representation to the material actions underpinning it, Tolstoy blurs the boundary between representational and nonrepresentational realms, relocating the mimetic spectacle from a sphere of 'significance' [Jurgenson 2003: 57-66] to a field where it ceases to function effectively.⁹

Pragmatic conversion assumes a central role in this sabotage. Beyond unveiling the materiality of the signifier – its colours, textures, sounds – it also acknowledges the human labour involved in its creation. This is exemplified by the past participle verbs used to describe objects, portraying them as repositories of past activities: the boards have been 'painted' and 'glued', the canvas has been 'stretched'. Additionally, the alteration of 'v obtjazhku pantalonakh' ('in tight-fitting pants') to 'v obtyanutykh pantalonakh' ('in pants fitted close to the body'), introducing a verbal form, underscores the required operation for this visual outcome.

In addition to these upstream actions crystallized in the objects, there are those constituting the gestural support of the performance. Here, the text exposes the representational purpose of scenic entities through verbs like 'kartony, izobrozhavshiye derev'ya' ('the cardboard representing trees'), and 'muzhchina i zhenshina na scene, kotoryye izobrazhali vlyublennyykh' ('the man and the woman on stage, representing lovers'). This dismantling of theatrical functioning prevents the deployed actions from functioning as tools in a game of make-believe.

Rather than a conversion into actions, this entails a desemantization of scenic postures. Detached from its representational outcome, action is reduced to its 'gestural matter'. Achieved through the imperfective aspect and a poor, redundant lexicon, this transformation reduces the piece to a behaviourist succession of starts and stops, inherently absurd as the logic of their succession lies in a sphere of meaning made inaccessible. This desemantization extends to singing, where the verb 'pet' ('to sing') is coordinated with other action verbs ('pet' i razvodit' rukami'), reducing singing to just another gesture.

This example suggests that alongside processes designed to make things visible, there exists a second repertoire of techniques which aims at suppressing boundaries inside the phenomenon. An example is the use of generic terms ('devica,' 'muzhchina') and pronouns ("vse," "oni") to refer to actors instead of their role names. The avoidance of names through pronouns serves to invisibilize individuals and to trivialize their actions rather than sensitize to events, highlighting the misconception of

9 Luba Jurgenson's idea of 'significance' aligns with Jacques Rancière's notion of the 'poetic regime of the arts,' where the distribution of social roles renders the arts visible through mimesis [Rancière 2000:26 – 45]. In this regime, certain imitations evade truth legislation and adhere to alternative normativities.

translating 'ostranenie' as 'singularization' – some processes associated with this effect precisely entail an opposite gesture.

Furthermore, indefinite pronouns, interchangeable in referring to actors or the audience, create a commonality between individuals on stage and in the hall, breaking the fourth wall. This technique is complemented by mentioning elements like the prompter's box or the stage and actors in performance in the same breath. This refusal to compartmentalize these two realms establishes a continuity between a reality to be read for itself and one signifying something beyond itself.

Lastly, these processes of continuity possess a temporal dimension. Actions depicted occur in a pure succession that obfuscates causal relationships or semiotic ruptures between them. Achieved through temporal adverbs lacking causal meaning ('kogda,' 'potom') and the conjunction 'i' expressing a vague juxtaposition, a single sentence structures the transition from a sung performance – where actors act as signs – to their salute to the crowd – where actors *are their actions*.

Three observations emerge from this initial analysis:

First, the effect of *ostranenie* cannot be reduced to a single technique. There is a plurality of strategies for constructing this effect: disappearance of causal markers, use of non-relevant focalization to grasp the stakes of the scene, use of homogenizing pronouns and hyperonyms, etc. All these processes operate according to their own modalities. The effect provoked by the explicitation of hidden agencies in the scene's decor is not the same as that which arises, for example : from the reformulation of an abstraction, such as justice and property, in terms of actions perpetrated (or not perpetrated), from focalization games allowing the reduction of an individual's psychic life to their gestural manifestations, from the erasure of boundaries between spectacle and non-spectacle, or from the inhibition of causal relations. In this context, it would be more accurate to speak of strangeness not as a single experience, but as a plurality of mental states, as varied as the textual means used to construct them.

Second, pragmatic conversion techniques play a role in most scenes analysed by Shklovsky. Once again, there are variations. In *Kholstomer* and in 'Shameful,' the objective is rather to reveal the actions (the verbal forms) that envelop or should envelop a certain signifier. These are actions that are the empirical translation of a concept: the empirical translation of justice is violence; the empirical translation of property is non-usage. Conversely, in Natasha's opera scene, the emergence of action in the description of things takes the form of verbal epithets used to reveal a fabrication process of which the objects are the trace. Pragmatic conversion then does not lead to a simple act of translation, but to an exhumation, a bringing to the present of past actions contained within the thing.

Third, all the pragmatic conversions encountered in these texts are anchored in the experiences of focalized characters. They serve to mediate perceptions specific to certain points of view – which may be that of the author as a character. This observation, which should be tested on a broader corpus of texts, leads me to consider that this technique – probably most of the techniques involved in the strangeness effect – should be analysed primarily as a representational marker: an indication of the interiority of fictional beings.

Pragmatic Conversion as World Pictures

If pragmatic conversions (in its two previously identified variations) are one of the tools used in constructing the feeling of strangeness, one may wonder if this tool is inseparable from this purpose. I will argue that this technique is, for Tolstoy, a means of juxtaposing and competing descriptions of the world specific to certain sociologically situated points of view. To highlight this usage, I will draw on two other texts: the description of the harvest in the epilogue of *Anna Karenina* and the death sentence by Nicholas I of a soldier in *Hadzhi Murat*.

The description of the harvest in the epilogue of *Anna Karenina* relies on the same deconstructive techniques employed in *Kholstomer* and the article 'Shameful.' In all three cases, the text deprives us of an expression to name what is shown, replacing it first with the periphrasis 'working time,' then with a description of what this 'time' contains. However, this avoidance of nomination does not seem to be accompanied by an effect of strangeness, but rather constructs a pathos of collective effort, carried by expansive periods and the accumulation of coordinated actions sometimes by asyndeton, sometimes by polysyndeton.

It was the very busiest working time, when all the people show an unusual tension of self-sacrifice in labour, such as is never shown in any other conditions of life and would be highly esteemed if the men who showed these qualities themselves thought highly of them, and if it were not repeated every year, and if the results of this intense labour were not so simple.

To reap and bind the rye and oats and to carry it, to mow the meadows, turn over the fallows, thrash the seed and sow the winter corn – all this seems so simple and ordinary; but to succeed in getting through it all on time everyone in the village, from the old man to the young child, must work incessantly for three or four weeks, three times as hard as usual, living on rye beer, onions, and black bread, threshing and carrying the sheaves at night, and not giving more than two or three hours in the twenty-four to sleep. And this is happening every year all over Russia. [19:374]¹⁰

The text not only substitutes a description for the noun. From an abstract and timeless representation of work, marked by nominalization, it extracts a dynamic description, characterized by the use of a certain type of verbal form.

In the first paragraph, work is designated by the periphrasis: 'tension of self-sacrifice in labour' (*napryazhenie samopozhertvovaniya v trude*). This expression is a combination of three nouns, the first two of which are action nouns. In the second paragraph, work will be described through an enumeration of perfective verbs: *skosit'* (to mow), *sžat'* (to compress), *svezti* (to haul), *dokosit'* ('to reap'), *peredvoit'* ('to plough a second time'), *obmolotit'* ('to thresh'), *poseyat'* ('to sow'). These actions are envisaged through their results. Each of these verbs denotes a transformation movement of matter with potentially measurable effects. However, this reduction of work to its 'consequences' (*posledstviya*), qualified as 'simple' (*prosty*), is presented by the text as one of the obstacles to understanding what constitutes the value of the labour phenomenon: not the product, already in the process of becoming autonomous, reified, and utilized, but the event of its production and the non-fungible pains of the producer.

Therefore, the description of the harvest is complemented, at the end of the excerpt, by a series of statements manifesting the efforts that the results conceal. Separated from the previous one by strong punctuation, this sequence is opened by a conjunctive proposition with a final sense, combining two perfective verbs having two indefinite pronouns as objects ('a chtoby uspet' sdelat' vsjě eto'). This introduction allows for both a reappropriation of the previously mentioned results, their relativization through indefiniteness, and a reminder of their secondary position relative to the primary work. It thus bridges the descriptions of work as visible results and as hidden active processes.

The text then summons the workers themselves. The peasants, who until now have been the subject of generalizing designations (*narod, lyudi*), see their characterization specified by the link with the village (*derevenskiye*) and by the diversity of generations – the evocation of old age already used in relation to the victims of justice.

10 Было самое спешное рабочее время, когда во всем народе проявляется такое необыкновенное напряжение самопожертвования в труде, какое не проявляется ни в каких других условиях жизни и которое высоко ценимо бы было, если бы люди, проявляющие эти качества, сами ценили бы их, если б оно не повторялось каждый год и если бы последствия этого напряжения не были так просты. Скосить и сжать рожь и овес и сvezти, докосить луга, передвоить пар, обмолотить семена и посеять озимое – всё это кажется просто и обыкновенно; а чтобы успеть сделать всё это, надо, чтобы от старого до малого все деревенские люди работали не переставая в эти три-четыре недели втрое больше, чем обыкновенно, питаясь квасом, луком и черным хлебом, молотя и возя снопы по ночам и отдавая сну не более двух-трех часов в сутки. И каждый год это делается по всей России.

Finally, the verb 'to work' (*rabotat'*) appears for the first time. It is in turn explained by a succession of verbs in the gerundive of imperfective aspect, which decompose the notion of 'working' into an accumulation of durative processes: *ne perestavaya* ('without stopping'), *pitayas'* (struggling), *molotyaya* (threshing), *vozya* (hauling), *otdavaya* (giving).

At the end of this analytical movement, the text reappropriates in a brief sentence the visible things that have emerged: 'And this is happening every year all over Russia.' This synthetic gesture is not a step backward, but the affirmation of a new perspective on what work is. It is not the abstract work of action nouns, nor the accomplished work captured in things, but a work in progress. The verb *delayet'sya* ('is happening') can be read as an transformation of the expression *uspet' sdelat'* ('to succeed in getting through') in conformity to this new perspective.

The opposition that Tolstoy stages between the orders of *delaniye* (the doing) and *sdelannoye* (what is done) is not without recalling one of the statements by which Shklovsky attempts to grasp the notion of *ostranenie*:

[...] art is a way of experiencing the doing [delanye] of a thing, and the deed [sdelannoye] is of no importance in art. [Shklovskij 1990 (1917) : 63]¹¹

Just as the product of shaping is 'what is unimportant for art', the work considered in its fruits is nothing but the reifying projection of a past endeavour. This 'energetic intuition' [Zenkin 2017: 71-94], while on one level bringing the novelist closer to his critic, also highlights differences in aim. Drawing on Humboldtian terminology, Shklovsky has in mind the incessant renewal of semasiological relations between language and things, suddenly realized in a fresh form. Tolstoy, on the other hand, articulates different possibilities of formalization to prove to us that not all are equal: some succeed in describing what others fail to name.

Moreover, Shklovsky missed the fact that the various modelization of reality permitted by these linguistic transformations seem closely linked to the positionalities of the focalized character. They first constitute a representational marker consciously implemented before being a trace of the renewal of forms.

Thus, in the previous excerpt, the intuitions that lead the heterodiegetic narrator, on the one hand, to formulate this description of the world as actions, on the other hand, to make it the culmination of his analytical enterprise, are not only indications of an authorial perspective. These modifications are

11 [...] искусство есть способ пережить деланье вещи, а сделанное в искусстве не важно.

inserted at a moment when Levin reaches the most developed form of his convictions and therefore participate in a movement of the character's ascent towards a form of authenticity. Furthermore, these descriptions reflect the character's contradictory position between the labouring class and the leisure class, making him a witness to the actions that envelop his peers' way of life.

However, there are situations where pragmatic conversion does not constitute a gesture of rendering reality visible, but rather of concealment. An example of this configuration is given to us in Chapter XV of *Hadzhi Murat* when Tsar Nicholas I effectively condemns a soldier to death while pretending to commute this death sentence into a supposedly lesser punishment:

Chernyshev knew, having heard it more than once from Nicholas, that when he had to decide any important question, he only had to concentrate for a few moments, and that then he was struck by an intuition, and the decision was made by himself, as if some inner voice told him what should be done. He was now thinking how he could more fully satisfy the feeling of anger towards the Poles who had been stirred up in him by the student's story, and the inner voice suggested to him the following solution. He took the report, and in the margin of it he wrote in his large handwriting: 'Deserves the *deth*¹² penalty. But, thank God, we don't have the death penalty. And it is not for me to introduce it. Carry out 12 times through a thousand people. Nikolaj,' he signed with his huge, unnatural flourish.

Nikolaj knew that twelve thousand strokes was not only a sure, agonizing death, but unnecessary cruelty, for five thousand strokes were enough to kill the strongest man. But it pleased him to be relentlessly cruel, and it pleased him to think that we had no capital punishment. [35:72-73]¹³

In this illustrative instance, Nicholas himself engages in the pragmatic conversion of punishment. The concept of the death penalty, encapsulated within a nominal syntagma (*smertnaya kazn'*), undergoes substitution with an imperative verb form

12 The original text intentionally includes spelling errors, revealing Nicholas's inability to write in Russian proficiently.

13 Чернышев знал, слышав это не раз от Николая, что, когда ему нужно решить какой-либо важный вопрос, ему нужно было только сосредоточиться на несколько мгновений, и что тогда на него находило наитие, и решение составлялось само собою самое верное, как бы какой-то внутренний голос говорил ему, что нужно сделать. Он думал теперь о том, как бы полнее удовлетворить тому чувству злобы к полякам, которое в нем расшевелилось историей этого студента, и внутренний голос подсказал ему следующее решение. Он взял доклад и на поле его написал своим крупным почерком: «Заслуживает смертной казни. Но, слава Богу, смертной казни у нас нет. И не мне вводить ее. Провести 12 раз скрозь тысячу человек. Николай», подписал он с своим неестественным, огромным росчерком.

Николай знал, что двенадцать тысяч шпицрутенгов была не только верная, мучительная смерть, но излишняя жестокость, так как достаточно было пяти тысяч ударов, чтобы убить самого сильного человека. Но ему приятно было быть неумолимо жестоким, и приятно было думать, что у нас нет смертной казни.

(*provesti*). The tsar hypocritically maintains that this linguistic metamorphosis implies a fundamental alteration in the essence of the punitive measure. His rhetorical manoeuvre entails asserting that the resulting death from the decreed actions does not align with his original intent when employing this verbal construction.

Such an assertion would seem absurd had the tsar retained the syntagma *smertnaya kazn'*, which inherently encompasses the notion of 'inflicting death.' Acknowledging that death penalty entails mortality is a self-evident truth that necessitates no further elucidation but derives from an examination of the concept itself. It is a tautology that engenders a certain type of cognition, termed apodictic evidence. This evidence confers such lucidity upon the connection between the command and its consequence that refuting the existence of this link would be as challenging as contesting axiomatic propositions like 'a triangle has three sides.'

Conversely, recognizing that 'twelve thousand strokes of the rod' imply death requires supplemental information – information that Tolstoy must provide to make the scene understandable – specifically, the fact that fatalities occur beyond five thousand rod strokes. Establishing the proposition 'twelve thousand strokes of the rod result in death' appears to necessitate synthetic engagement involving all cognitive faculties: the will not to see these rod strokes merely as lexical entities; *memory retrieval* to summon common knowledge; *imaginative projection* to imbue this sign with empirical reality, envisaging its dynamic materiality subject to causal influences and its effects on a corporeal entity, and more. This process of extracting reality from linguistic constructs constitutes a cognitive exertion that delays the grasp of the notion, diminishes evidential clarity, and veils the emperor's homicidal intent.

Nicholas perceives greater reality in objects than in actions, habituated to construing the world as an assemblage of entities. In *Anna Karenina*, a similar viewpoint is adopted by Vronsky when 'he regards people as things' [18:111]. But that is not the case for

24 The original text intentionally includes spelling errors, revealing Nicholas's inability to write in Russian proficiently.

25 Чернышев знал, слышав это не раз от Николая, что, когда ему нужно решить какой-либо важный вопрос, ему нужно было только сосредоточиться на несколько мгновений, и что тогда на него находило наитие, и решение составлялось само собою самое верное, как бы какой-то внутренний голос говорил ему, что нужно сделать. Он думал теперь о том, как бы полнее удовлетворить тому чувству злости к полякам, которое в нем расшевелилось историей этого студента, и внутренний голос подсказал ему следующее решение. Он взял доклад и на поле его написал своим крупным почерком: «Заслуживает смертной казни. Но, слава Богу, смертной казни у нас нет. И не мне вводить ее. Провести 12 раз скрозь тысячу человек. Николай», подписал он с своим неестественным, огромным росчерком. Николай знал, что двенадцать тысяч шпицрутеных была не только верная, мучительная смерть, но излишняя жестокость, так как достаточно было пяти тысяч ударов, чтобы убить самого сильного человека. Но ему приятно было быть неумолимо жестоким, и приятно было думать, что у нас нет смертной казни. [35:72-73]

every Tolstoyan character. Levin, though subject to the tendency to represent his own experience as a collection of things, endeavours to build a different world picture. The protagonist strives to disentangle himself from the grip of objects, perceiving them as vestiges of past actions that constrain future potentialities. This tension aligns with a polarity reminiscent of the Shklovskian dichotomy: on the one hand, the consummated actions, the 'works' (*ergon/sdelannoye*); on the other, the potential for actions, the 'energy' (*energeia/delan'ye*).

All these traces of his life seemed to engulf him and say to him: 'No, you will not depart from us and will not be different but will remain the same as you were: with doubts, eternal dissatisfaction with yourself, futile attempts at improvement and falls, and eternal anticipation of happiness, which was not given to you and is impossible for you.'

But these were the words of his things; another voice in his soul said that one should not submit to the past and that anything is possible. [18 :100]¹⁴

One approach to elucidate these disparities would be to consider a correlation between the positionalities of characters in Tolstoy's narratives and the pre-ontological frameworks they construct. Characters integrated into the symbolic order, often individuals of privilege, appear at ease within a realm of concepts and objects. However, this very realm swiftly becomes indecipherable when scrutinized from the standpoint of the practices enfolded by these objects. Conversely, characters estranged from this symbolic order endeavour to rediscover an ontology of action, potentialities, and processes. Pragmatic conversion thus operates as a lever enabling Tolstoy to investigate reality through diverse social vantage points, thereby unveiling the dependence of our worldviews on our level of integration into a community imbued with representations.

The case of Natasha Rostova at the opera appears to lend support to this conjecture. Tolstoy underscores that the young girl's experience of strangeness arises following a period of isolation, compounded by her status as a woman and an adolescent, which prompts her to view social space from a peripheral perspective (despite her aristocratic standing). The text explicitly asserts that these positional factors, alongside Natasha's seriousness, account for the character's perceptions:

¹⁴ Все эти следы его жизни как будто охватили его и говорили ему: «нет, ты не уйдешь от нас и не будешь другим, а будешь такой же, каков был: с сомнениями, вечным недовольством собой, напрасными попытками исправления и падениями и вечным ожиданием счастья, которое не далось и невозможно тебе». Но это говорили его вещи, другой же голос в душе говорил, что не надо подчиняться прошедшему и что с собой сделать всё возможно.

After the village and in the serious disposition Natasha was in, it all seemed wild and surprising. [10 :318]¹⁵

Furthermore, the notion that the character's perceptions arise from her lack of experience at the opera, as posited by Shklovsky in establishing a correlation between strangeness and 'seeing for the first time', is untenable. It is mistakenly assumed that Natasha is a neophyte in opera matters. Have we not observed her perform brilliantly on numerous occasions, notably with 'her favourite musical phrase from an opera by Cherubini' [10:194]? Indeed, all indications lead us to believe that the young woman possesses a deeper understanding of this art form than most characters in the novel. Thus, the perspective she brings to the Petersburg spectacle cannot be ascribed to ineptitude. Instead, it emerges as a consequence of her situated ontology, which, as elucidated earlier, concerns itself more with actions, especially the past actions 'contained' in things.

This interpretation, which establishes a correlation between positionalities and world pictures, is also pertinent for comprehending the depictions in *Kholstomer*. It seems unfruitful to see the horse as discovering the mechanics of property at the moment it discusses it. Rather, it appears that the disparity between nominal ownership and the actuality of actions has been recognized by the horse on numerous occasions and has crystallized into a worldview. Consequently, what the pragmatic conversion conveys in this instance is not so much an affective encounter as an intellectual inclination towards a particular worldview, wherein active processes are deemed to occupy a more foundational stratum of reality than theoretical constructs such as ownership.

Tolstoy's "Anti-Thingism"

I posited that pragmatic conversion offers a method of comparing subjective ontologies within the textual realm. However, for Tolstoy, not all these conceptualizations hold equal weight. In the previous excerpt from *Anna Karenina*, the logic of the text seems to favour a depiction of reality as actions. The gradual transfiguration of farmer work follows a narrative dynamic that leads Levin to the 'truth' – or at least a form of 'truthfulness' [Williams 2002]. Furthermore, I suggested a correlation between the characters' positionalities, or more precisely, their degree of integration into the symbolic order of their era, and their tendency to favour 'thingist' ontologies (the most integrated) or 'pragmatist' ontologies (the least integrated).

¹⁵ После деревни и в том серьезном настроении, в котором находилась Наташа, все это было дико и удивительно ей.

It is evident which category of characters, according to Tolstoy, is more apt at expressing reality 'as it is'. In the examples I cited, the characters associated with 'pragmatist' representations are consistently those who either experience a revelation in the narrative (Levin), embark on an initiatory journey affirming the story's moral direction (Natasha), or embody a critical perspective on human institutions rejected by the author (Holstomer, Tolstoy himself in his articles). Unambiguously, those embodying the 'pragmatist' ontology are presented as truth bearers. While drawn from a limited corpus, these observations must be juxtaposed with other texts and character archetypes to gain broader applicability. For instance, it would be insightful to ascertain whether the peasants depicted in Tolstoy's works share this ontology.

A more modest approach to validating this initial proposition would involve comparing it with texts where the writer discusses the theme of authentic representation. What technical suggestions does the writer make for describing reality? I will begin to provide some insights into this in the subsequent section. My aim is not to compile an exhaustive list of sources – such a task would exceed the scope of this paper. Instead, I will highlight texts that appear to constitute pivotal moments in Tolstoy's intellectual journey on these matters. These contextual remarks are not intended as conclusive but rather to lay the groundwork for future exploration outlined in the preceding paragraph.

Can we discern the contours of an ontological model reflected in young Tolstoy's philosophical and poetic endeavours? One document particularly suited to this inquiry is a draught titled *O celi filosofii* from spring 1847 [1:338 – 339]. Here, the budding writer probes the purpose of human activity [1:229 – 230] and outlines a 'method for the learning speculative philosophy' (*metoda dlya poznaniya spekulativnoy filosofii*). This method is not a scientific protocol aimed at establishing true propositions but rather a set of exercises to enhance 'intellectual capacities' (*umvstvennyye sposobnosti*) and accumulate foundational knowledge. This approach suggests that a more accurate understanding of reality arises through self-transformation rather than the manipulation of objects. In other words, research primarily involves a transformation of the researchers being rather than a mastery of scientific methods.

What exercises did young Tolstoy undertake to cultivate his intellectual virtues? He identifies three: studying the laws of nature and psychology, developing intellectual faculties through mathematics, and exercises aimed at facilitating the expression of thought (*v uprazhneniyakh dlya lyogkosti vyrasheniya mysli*). The latter includes practising what he terms 'definitions' (*opredeleniya*), referring to the process of deconstructing concepts into increasingly fundamental semantic elements until

reaching an atomic notion, such as the 'I' (*ya*). As highlighted by Donna Tussing Orwin [1993:32] and Michel Aucouturier [1996:17], this approach reflects Tolstoy's reading of the French philosopher René Descartes:

b) Definition of a definition.

Defining a notion (*ponyatye*) is: replacing the defined concept with the simplest concepts of which it is composed. This action is called analysis. –By analysing any concept, it is possible to go from the most complex to the most abstract, i.e. to one that cannot be defined. –This kind of concept is called consciousness. What is consciousness? Consciousness is the concept of the self – in other words, the I. [1 :230]¹⁶

A few paragraphs later, Tolstoy reformulates the same methodology:

Define every notion (*ponyatye*), i.e. to insert two notions of wider extent and meaning in place of one narrow notion, then define these two notions, and finally reach notions which cannot have definitions, but which we are aware of, because they are nothing else but necessary signs of the self. [1 :231]¹⁷

Despite their fragmented nature, these two texts serve as documentation of a young man's endeavours in formulating his own linguistic expression. Boris Eikhenbaum previously posited that the speculative endeavours of the Tolstoy from the years 1847–1850 were driven less by a quest for a specific thesis than by 'an interest in the very process of thought and the trajectory of reasoning as it adheres to logical patterns' [2009:77]. At this juncture, the writer's aim is not merely to employ language but to unravel its mechanisms, explore its potentialities, and acknowledge its limitations.

The young Tolstoy evidently espouses a thingist world picture. Yet, it is discernible that the author already engages in transformative methods. The approach employed here does not precisely align with pragmatic conversion; rather, it involves the replacement of one concept with another. However, these constructs are destined to dissolve, ultimately to be rearticulated through signifiers of a distinct calibre – an enigmatic notion articulated by the writer as 'the necessary signs of the self'.

16 b) Определе́ние определе́ния.

Определе́ние поня́тия есть: заме́нение опреде́ленного поня́тия простейшими поня́тиями, изъ кото́рых оно состоитъ. Дѣйстви́е это называется анализомъ. – Посредствомъ анализа ка́кого бы то ни было поня́тия можно дойти отъ са́мого сло́жного до са́мого отвле́ченного, т. е. до тако́го, кото́рое опреде́лено бытъ не можетъ. – Э́того ро́да поня́тие называется сознани́емъ. Что же есть сознани́е? сознани́е есть поня́тие са́мого се́бя – други́ми сло́вами – я.

17 Опреде́лять вся́кое поня́тие, т. е. на мѣсто одно́го тѣсна́го поня́тия вставля́ть два обширнѣйшихъ и означа́ющихъ то́же, потомъ опреде́лять э́ти оба поня́тия, наконецъ доходить до поня́тий та́кихъ, кото́рыя не могутъ имѣ́ть опреде́лений, но кото́рый мы созна́емъ, потому́ что они су́ть не что́ иное, какъ необходи́м[ы]е призна́ки са́мого я.

Despite the intended goal of this analytical movement remaining somewhat elusive, its mere existence suggests Tolstoy's discontentment with modelization of the world out of concepts.

It requires a decade for Tolstoy to overtly oppose this thingist stance. This epiphany unfolds within the framework of his pedagogical initiatives among the peasantry, chronicled through a series of articles penned for the journal *Yasnaya Polyana*.

In one of these narratives, Tolstoy recounts his endeavours to impart writing skills to rural folk. Initially, he encourages students to 'depict objects' (*predmetry*) – bread, izbas, trees, and the like. However, their attempts falter, with many unable to produce even a single line regarding these subjects. Despite the instructor's guidance, which includes dissecting the concept of bread into its production stages – evocative of the conversion processes observed in *Natasha and Levin* – most children rebuff this exercise, finding themselves 'on the verge of tears'. Those who do engage produce compositions fraught with errors [8:71]. Subsequently, students are tasked with narrating events (*sobytiya*). This prompt is met with enthusiasm and yields markedly superior results. Tolstoy unequivocally interprets the outcome of this experiment:

The description of so-called simple objects, so highly favoured in schools, such as pigs, pots, tables, turned out to be incomparably more difficult than complete stories than whole stories taken from memory. The same mistake repeated itself here, as in all other subjects of teaching: what seems easy for the teacher is what is simple and general (*obshcheye*) whereas only what is complex looks easy and vivid to the pupil. [8 :71–72]¹⁸

In his pedagogical essay *Who Should Learn Writing From Whom?* (1862), Tolstoy proposes an alternative exercise: the transformation of proverbs into narratives. Once again, the outcomes are satisfactory. These proto-narrations, wherein objects serve not considered in themselves but as vehicles for conveying some general truth, significantly enhance children's creativity compared to mere descriptions of things.

These observations prompt Tolstoy to reassess the Cartesian assumption that all knowledge acquisition processes must commence with definitive elements. Indeed, these elements are not readily apparent to children. They represent not foundational data but rather the outcome of an educational transformation of natural world representations.

¹⁸ Столь любимое в школах описание так называемых простых предметов: свиньи, горшка, стола, оказалось без сравнения труднее, чем целые, из воспоминаний взятые рассказы. Одна и та же ошибка повторилась при этом, как и во всех других предметах преподавания: учителю кажется легким самое простое и общее, а для ученика только сложное и живое кажется легким.

Almost every teacher, following the same line of thought, in their first composition sets forth the definition of a table or bench and does not want to convince themselves that in order to define a table or bench, one must stand at a high level of philosophical-dialectical development. [8 :72]¹⁹

What are the characteristics of these 'complex' representations that the writer regards as natural? Towards the end of the paragraph, the writer enumerates three specific types of composition subjects that are particularly accessible to children: describing events (*opisaniya sobytiya*), interpersonal relationships (*otnosheniya k licam*), and recounting heard stories (*peredacha slyshannyh rasskazov*). By 'relationships', the educator refers not only to understanding the positions individuals hold in relation to one another, but also to the emotions they feel towards each other, such as love or hatred, as these provide a sufficiently explanatory model for the behaviours of others.

According to Tolstoy, the natural way to organize experience relies on narratives motivated by psychological causes, thereby making actions, rather than objects, the basic units of significance in human life. The precedence given to actions and concepts arises from a *denarrativization* of experience, which occurs later in an individual's developmental trajectory (mostly thanks to education). Consequently, the function of pragmatic conversions for the writer becomes clearer: to reintroduce narrative structures distorted by modern education. The convergence of objectivist and actionist models in Tolstoy with certain positions is indeed a consequence of this thesis. The more a character is integrated into the symbolic order of modernity, the more their perception of reality is shaped by education and the objectivist bias.

Tolstoy's criticism of the worldview generated by the educational system extends beyond its artificiality to its propensity for generating low-quality narratives burdened by specific conventions. These conventions compel the delineation of spatial, temporal, material, and even character biographical frameworks to facilitate the comprehension of actions. This inclination, observed in the literature of his era (and acknowledged as impacting his own literary endeavours), is labelled by Tolstoy as 'vulgarity' (*poshlost'*).

In contrast, peasants do not need to construct entities to narrate. Action alone suffices to create a network of intelligibility in which subjects and objects are implicitly suggested. The significance of this return to action lies not so much in transitioning from the abstract to the concrete (as objects like a

¹⁹ Почти всякий учитель, руководясь тем же путем мышления, первым сочинением задает определение стола или лавки и не хочет убедиться, что для того, чтобы определить стол или лавку, нужно стоять на высокой степени философско-диалектического развития.

table or a piece of bread are inherently concrete) but primarily in diminishing the centrality of definitions in our representations. It seems that reducing the world to a collection of things presupposes that things possess inherent meaning, so that all meaning emanates from the composition of these entities. However, for Tolstoy, the meaning of an experience does not arise from the sum of the significations of its constituent parts. Rather, an experience acquires meaning to the extent that it is organized *a priori* as a narrative of intentional actions. The significance of this return to action lies not so much in transitioning from the abstract to the concrete (as objects like a table or a piece of bread are inherently concrete) but primarily in diminishing the centrality of definitions in our representations. It seems that reducing the world to a collection of things presupposes that things possess inherent meaning, so that all meaning emanates from the composition of these entities. However, for Tolstoy, the meaning of an experience does not arise from the sum of the significations of its constituent parts. Rather, an experience acquires meaning to the extent that it is organized *a priori* as a narrative of intentional actions. The entities mentioned within this narrative are inherently devoid of semantic value. It is only when these entities are embedded within a narrative syntax structured by psychological causality that they acquire contextual meaning.

This precedence of narrative over signs is exemplified by Fed'ka, one of Tolstoy's pupils, and his selection of relevant content for writing. To initiate his narrative, the boy does not require his teacher to have previously built a world in which the story unfolds. Merely invoking action suffices to populate the fictional world with a multitude of pre-characterized entities and objects.

If I hinted, for example, about what the peasant was doing, how his wife ran away to her sibling, Fed'ka's imagination immediately conjured up a picture of lamps bleating in a horse-drawn carriage, with the sighs of an old man and the delirium of the little Serjozhka; [8 :304]²⁰

Upon Tolstoy's suggestion to Fed'ka to incorporate details that had not organically arisen in the narrative (such as the appearance of a character), Fed'ka declines:

[...] as soon as I hinted to some artificial and deceiving picture, he would angrily reply that it is unnecessary. I suggested, for example, to describe the peasant's look, he refused; [8 :304]²¹

²⁰ Стоило мне только намекнуть о том, например, что делал мужик, как жена убежала к куму, и в воображении Федьки тотчас же возникла картина с ягнятами, бякающими в коннике, со вздохами старика и бредом мальчика Сережки; [...]

²¹ [...] стоило мне только намекнуть на картину искусственную и ложную, как он тотчас же сердито говорил, что этого не надо. Я предложил, например, описать наружность мужика, — он не согласился;

Thoughts, as explanatory narratives of the characters' behaviours, appear to be considered as possible entities within the ontological framework of the peasants:

[...] but my proposition to describe what the peasant was thinking while his wife was gone to her sibling immediately brought up in his mind this turn of thought: 'Eh! woman! If you should meet the dead Savoska, he would tear your hair out' [8 :304]²²

It is commonly acknowledged that the writer, upon examining the writings of his students – regrettably, the initial draughts of which are lost – discovers a 'sense of measure' (*chuvstvo mery*) that elevates them to the realm of the finest artistic endeavours [8:307]. Should one credit Tolstoy's assertion that this episode unveils a technical secret to him? To what extent does he exploit this episode to exemplify a thesis he already holds? This query transcends the scope of my analysis.

Nevertheless, these experiences, which affirm the precedence of narrating actions over detailing objects, furnish the writer with a critical framework. Three decades later, the author of *What is art?* (1897) steadfastly upholds this conviction, citing the Joseph cycle as a paradigm of literary achievement. According to him, the composition of this biblical narrative originates from neglected principles of his contemporaneous writers. The text is crafted from a standpoint that mirrors the innate disposition towards the world. The yardstick of authenticity parallels that of peasant anecdotes. It is the progression of action, facilitating the conveyance of sentiments (*peredacha chuvstv*), which dictates the hierarchy of the objects that it is relevant to show.

In the narrative of Joseph, it was not necessary to describe in detail, as is now done, Joseph's bloody garments, and Jacob's dwelling and clothing, and the posture and attire of Pentephra's wife, how she, adjusting the bracelet on her left hand, said: 'Come in to me,' etc., because the content of the feeling in this story is so strong that all the details – except the most necessary ones, such as the fact that Joseph went to the other room to cry – are superfluous and would only prevent the feeling from being conveyed. Therefore, this story is understandable to all people, touches people of all nations, classes, and ages, has reached us and will live for millennia to come. But let's remove all the details (*podrobnosti*) from the best novels of our time: what would remain? [30:162]²³

22 [...] но на предложение описать то, что думал мужик, когда жена бегала к куму, ему тотчас же представился оборот мысли: «эх, напалась бы ты на Савоську покойника, тот бы те космы-то повыдергал!»

23 В повествовании об Иосифе не нужно было описывать подробно, как это делают теперь, окровавленную одежду Иосифа и жилище и одежду Иакова, и позу и наряд Пентефриевой жены, как она, поправляя браслет на левой руке, сказала: «Войди ко мне», и т. п., потому что содержание чувства в этом рассказе так сильно, что все подробности, исключая самых необходимых, как, например, то, что Иосиф вышел в другую комнату, чтобы заплакать, — что все эти подробности излишни и только

The process of converting things into action serves to illustrate a more authentic mode of experiencing the world and fosters the creation of superior art. Tolstoy supplements these two rationales with a third: the method also offers a more comprehensive explanation of our cognitive faculties. This assertion is implicit in the opening of Chapter XIII of the essay *On Life* (1886). Here, the author initiates the discussion by listing several propositions and syntagms whose significance presents no challenge:

What can be clearer than the words: the dog is in pain; the calf is affectionate – he loves me; the bird is happy, the horse is afraid, a good man, an evil animal? [26 :356]²⁴

Then, the author explains the reason for their apparent clarity:

All these most important understandable words are not determined by space and time; on the contrary: the more incomprehensible to us the law to which a phenomenon is subject, the more precisely the phenomenon is determined by time and space. Who shall say that he understands that law of gravitation by which the earth, the moon, and the sun move? And the eclipse of the sun is most accurately defined by space and time. [26 :356]²⁵

If these expressions seem clear, it is owing to their comprehension not necessitating an examination of the phenomenon as determined by spatial and temporal factors. According to Tolstoy, when we grasp the phrase ‘the dog suffers,’ we do not conjure a mental image of the suffering canine. Rather, we attribute experiences with which we are already acquainted to a sentient entity. Our understanding of these expressions stems from our capacity to see in other beings the same internal states and rationale (law of reason / *zakon razuma*). Essentially, genuine knowledge arises from a sense of *familiarity* between an entity and us.

Continuing in the chapter, Tolstoy arranges entities in hierarchical order based on their degree of familiarity and knowability. Ranked from the most familiar to the least, they are as follows:

помешали бы передать чувство, а потому рассказ этот доступен всем людям, трогает людей всех наций, сословий, возрастов, дошел до нас и проживет еще тысячелетия. Но отнимите у лучших романов нашего времени подробности, и что же останется?

24 Что может быть понятнее слов: собаке больно; теленок ласков – он меня любит; птица радуется, лошадь боится, добрый человек, злое животное?

25 И все эти самые важные понятные слова не определяются пространством и временем; напротив: чем непонятнее нам закон, которому подчиняется явление, тем точнее определяется явление временем и пространством. Кто скажет, что понимает тот закон тяготения, по которому происходит движение земли, луны и солнца? А затмение солнца самым точным образом определено пространством и временем.

- Our own life (*zhizn'*), our psychological experiences serve as the foundation of all knowledge.
- The corporeal life of our 'animal' (*zhivotnoye*) nature, which is already governed by spatial and temporal constraints.
- Other people, as they possess an 'animal person' (*zhivotnyye lichnosti*) akin to ours, are comprehensible to us to the extent that their actions abide by the same "laws of reason", and incomprehensible to the extent that their actions are determined by spatiotemporal conditions.
- Non-human animals, in whom we discern a semblance of personality (*lichnost'*).
- Plants, in whom identifying a personality poses challenges.
- Inanimate objects (*predmety*), which lack any discernible personality (*bezlichnye*) [26:356 – 357].

One implication of this epistemological framework is that entities with which we fail to identify are subject to what Tolstoy terms "false knowledge." For instance, we cannot really know what a planet in orbit is 'doing' because we cannot attribute our internal states to such entities.

Similarly, in *War and Peace*, French soldiers lack insight into Pierre's interiority, perceiving him not as a person but rather as an *object*. Natasha encounters a similar predicament concerning opera singers. The rationale underlying their actions – namely, the fact that an actor is performing on stage – eludes comprehension because it cannot be ascribed to a psychological law that we have previously experienced. Rather, their behaviours serve the representational intentions of a third party: the director. By instructing actors to adhere to external directives, theatrical conventions reduce human actions to a level of understanding less profound than that afforded to the movements of inanimate objects.

Significantly, the reification of action within the theatrical realm remains an incomplete process. There persists an inherent intentionality in the actions of living beings on stage, some of which transcend the constraints imposed by the theatrical apparatus. Pragmatic conversions highlight these different ways of being active, as exemplified in the subsequent sentence:

Then both fell silent, the music began to play, and the man began to run his fingers over the hand of the maiden in the white dress, evidently waiting again for a beat to begin his part with her. [10 :318]

Alongside actions that are unexplainable to the young woman (their beginning is always a surprise, as is highlighted by the repeated use of the verb *stat'*), Natasha can see that the man is awaiting something. Thus, for the first time since the play's

47 26:356 – 357.

inception, she successfully delves into another individual's inner realm. If she can do so, it is because this attitude does not stem from stage directions but from the actor's own rationale.

More generally, it appears that pragmatic conversion encapsulates Natasha's internal struggle with the reifying devices inherent in theatrical staging. Confronted with a performance devoid of intentional agency, as alien as an array of inanimate objects, the young woman endeavours, in her pursuit of meaning, to reintroduce intentional action wherever feasible. The profusion of verbs can be construed as a fervent, albeit largely unfulfilled endeavour to reinstate "natural" narratives within an environment where such narratives have been radically suppressed. Hence, the epistemic virtue of this technique becomes clear. Apart from uncovering concealed actions amidst an increasingly object-laden world – and disfigured by nominalization, as later underscored by Ivan Illich [1973:97 – 99] –, it encapsulates the human fight to reassert a semblance of intelligibility in the context of modernity.

Conclusion

Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*, encapsulated by the act of not naming things directly, sheds light on a prevalent set of writing techniques found in Tolstoy's prose: pragmatic conversions. These conversions, which involve replacing nominal descriptions of reality with verbal sequences highlighting actions, play a pivotal role in Tolstoy's narrative construction. While initially instrumental in creating a sense of strangeness, their significance transcends the elicitation of this effect. Pragmatic conversions serve as tools for deepening our understanding of reality by revealing the actions embedded within seemingly static objects or concepts.

Moreover, these techniques offer insights into character perception and situated ontologies. Through the characters' propensity to nominalize reality, we discern a correlation with their integration into modern society. The more characters are integrated into contemporary institutions, the more they view reality as an assemblage of objects, rather than a narrative of actions. With people in positions of power, such as Tsar Nicholas, pragmatic conversions can even be employed to mask reality, highlighting the complex interplay between narrative construction and social positionality.

Tolstoy's evolution as a writer reflects a profound shift from a youth enamoured with definitional analysis to a mature thinker who recognizes the primacy of narrative of actions. His critique of certain forms of realism underscores the limitations of representing the world as a collection of static entities. Through

pragmatic conversions, Tolstoy advocates for a mode of writing that favours narrative dynamics over descriptive precision, thereby aligning himself with the fundamental structure – in his opinion – of human experience.

Ultimately, the superiority of this narrative-centric approach transcends aesthetic considerations, encompassing epistemological domains. Tolstoy posits that true knowledge emerges from understanding the rationale of other beings, rather than merely nominating or depicting them. By reintroducing narrative actions, pragmatic conversions offer a powerful method of restoring intelligibility to a world imperiled by reification. This shift suggests that the act of nominalizing the world inherently constitutes a form of *fictionalization* of the experience, which Tolstoy's literary practice seeks to deconstruct.

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