

Deriding the Exotic: Techniques of Defamiliarization in Joseph Conrad, Ernest Hemingway, and James Joyce

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The term “defamiliarization” may seem too technical to describe a process that should appear more approachable under the label of “strangeness” or, even, “unfamiliarity.” As a matter of fact, the concept was first used to express the specific components of a piece of literature that provide it with its literary quality. According to Russian Formalism, in effect, literary language is just a “deviation” from ordinary language, to such an extent that the object of study for literary scholars should be literariness, rather than literature itself. It was Victor Shklovsky who argued that a work of art is created by techniques that should make it as obviously artistic as possible, as David Lodge comments:

Defamiliarization is the usual English translation of *ostranenie* (literally, “making strange”), another of those invaluable critical terms coined by the Russian Formalists. In a famous essay first published in 1917, Victor Shklovsky argued that the essential purpose of art is to overcome the deadening effects of habit by representing things in unfamiliar ways.¹

The term “defamiliarization,” unlike other options such as “unfamiliar” or simply “strange” implies a process that turns something that was previously familiar into something totally alien.

Defamiliarization certainly operates not only upon language, but also impregnates certain works where events appear deformed to the reader, reminding him or her of something familiar that has been distorted, and then, creating a distance between the reader and the narrator that usually conveys some touches of irony and humorous comments on the part of the latter. This is precisely the case in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun also Rises* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*,² where the characters Marlow, Jake, and Leopold Bloom, respectively, offer a description of actions that appear to be exotic and foreign to the characters in an attempt to make the reader feel as disconnected from these actions as they themselves are.

Regardless of the different styles developed by the three novelists and the diverse backgrounds to which they are associated, there exists a common feature among them that may determine the peculiar tone that the characters of the three novels adopt in their accounts of events. Indeed, the three novelists had the possibility to experience foreign cultures and adopt new customs and traditions, and therefore, though far from suggesting that the characters analysed here are a reflection of their authors, it is obvious that this cosmopolitan perspective has some influence on the characters’ attitudes.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the first narrative voice in the novel depicts Marlow in the following terms: “He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer too, while

most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life" (9). On the other hand, Jake's adventurous inclinations in *The Sun also Rises* are not made explicit, though he is insulted by his friend Bill: "You are an expatriate. You've lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all the time talking, not working" (120). Without entering into discussion about Bill's personal conceptions of the European temperament, it is obvious that Jake appears throughout the whole novel as a perfect connoisseur of most French and Spanish traditions. Finally, Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* constitutes an unusual case. In fact, he has never been anywhere but Dublin, and his experiences are often based on misinterpreted theories. And yet, Joyce chose this character as the personification of the modern Odysseus, as a representative figure of the wandering Jew or Sinbad the Sailor among many other travellers, minimizing in the daily circuit of an ordinary man the long list of human excursions throughout History.

Another common feature among the three characters is the fact that all of them become dramatized narrators, according to Wayne C. Booth's terminology, since the three of them play an important role in the story they offer.³ It is true that unlike Jake and Marlow, Bloom is not conscious of becoming a narrator, though the fact that the reader gets the information through Bloom's inner thoughts makes him a reflector of the events he experiences, as Booth explains: "the most important unacknowledged narrators in modern fiction are third-person 'centers of consciousness' through whom authors have filtered their narratives . . . Whether such 'reflectors' . . . are highly polished mirrors reflecting complex mental experience, or the rather turbid, sense-bound 'camera eyes' . . . they fill precisely the function of avowed narrators" (153). At the same time they all are "agents" in the sense that they "produce some measurable effect on the course of events" (Booth 153-54). In addition, the narrator of the story may be either conscious or unconscious of his role as story-teller, and this is the main discrepancy between Bloom and the other two characters: Jake and Marlow belong to the former category, whereas Joyce's character belongs to the latter.

Conrad and Hemingway's novels start as framed stories told by a narrative voice. The effect of this framing consists on lifting a veil that covers reality, providing their stories with a touch of unreliability. The manipulation of the story inevitably brings forth the distortion of the material used in the narration, provoking irony and defamiliarization. The narrator imposes his particular view of reality, being the only one who observes and evaluates. Notice, for example, the shift of narrative voice present in *Heart of Darkness* from the very beginning, where the story starts with a first-person narrative voice describing the landscape and commenting: "Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea" (7). The remark: "as I have already said" reveals his acknowledgement of his duty as story-teller, though the narrative voice suddenly introduces Marlow's utterance: "I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day . . . Light came out of this river since" (9). Like the previous narrative voice, Marlow also knows his task, as he constantly uses aporias in order to leave his sentences unfinished and create suspense.⁴ Marlow's first intervention undoubtedly parodies the story-telling of an old sailor, similar to the one that narrates the story in Coleridge's "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner."

In a similar manner, the narrator in Hemingway's novel is totally conscious of becoming the voice through which the reader perceives the events. Jake even inserts some direct comments addressing the reader, as in the very first paragraph of the novel: "Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title" (11). Nonetheless, as a narrator, Jake experiments frequent changes of attitude throughout the novel. For example, he shows a certain disdain towards his compatriots, despising the typical *nouveauriche*, travelling abroad but behaving like a peasant, as he shows in the dialogue with the two Americans who are on the same train:

"You both going to Biarritz?"
"No. We're going fishing in Spain."
"Well, I never cared for it, myself. There's plenty that do out where I come from, though. We got some of the best fishing in the State of Montana." (92)

The insular tone adopted by Jake's interlocutor contrasts with Jake's cosmopolitan experience, though there exist other occasions in the novel when the character assumes everybody to share his American perspective towards life. The comment about tips is one of those moments: "We each had an *aguardiente* and paid forty centimes for the two drinks. I gave the woman fifty centimes to make a tip, and she gave me back the copper piece, thinking I had misunderstood the price" (112). In this fragment, Jake assumes that the reader agrees with him that it is strange not to accept a tip, as is usual in many countries other than America, such as Spain. Jake makes the reader take part in the story, but only to make him feel apart from it. In this sense, he also employs several descriptions of the landscape with a profusion of definite articles pointing out that the narrator is perfectly familiar with the objects described:

Down the river was Notre Dame squatting against the night sky. We crossed to the left bank of the Seine by the wooden foot-bridge from the Quai de Bethune, and stopped on the bridge and looked down the river at Notre Dame. Standing on the bridge the island looked dark, the houses were high against the sky, and the trees were shadows. (83)

In opposition, consider then the next description: "There were trees along both sides of the road, and a stream and ripe fields of grain, and the road went on, very white and straight ahead, and then lifted to a little rise, and off on the left was a hill with an old castle" (99). All this alternate employment of the definite and the indefinite articles simply serves to provoke an uncomfortable sensation in the reader, who feels alienated in both cases: in the first case because he appears totally ignorant in comparison to the narrator's knowledge of the landscape he is portraying and in the second case, because the narrator is also ignorant, making the reader, who can only see through the narrator's eyes, become ignorant as well.

Unlike Jake and Marlow, Bloom is not a conscious narrator since he cannot possibly know that his inner thoughts are being revealed. In the "Hades" episode, the narration constantly fluctuates between a third-person narrative voice and Bloom's mental mechanisms. But this is the main evidence to prove that his interpretations of reality are not to be trusted. Whereas Marlow and Jake become unreliable narrators since they intend to manipulate the information they carry, Bloom offers purely mental associations, showing a metonymical apprehension of reality arrayed with

great doses of humour and irony. The three characters, then, manipulate reality, offering a far from objective version of the events they narrate. What definitely links the three characters is their way of describing a situation where they feel themselves to be total strangers. In an attempt to make the reader participate in this alienation, they depict what is supposed to be a relatively familiar incident as if it were an exotic ritual—religion implied in the case of Jake and Bloom—making clear that they do not feel at all attached to the social event they are describing.

In this sense, Hemingway's character is particularly close to Joyce's, or at least, both show at a specific moment in the two novels a similar attitude towards the same ritual tradition. In "Hades," for example, Bloom attends the burial of Paddy Dignam together with some other characters. Although Bloom tries to keep appearances, the lack of interest in the ceremony makes him add some comments that are not quite apropos the occasion. Moreover, he is the only character whose inner thoughts are exposed to the reader, revealing that Bloom does not see himself as a true member of the reunion. Bloom, a Jew converted to Catholicism, does not take part in the rituals followed during the burial or the mass, and his ironic and humorous comments are numerous throughout the whole episode, as in: "The resurrection and the life. Once you are dead you are dead. That last day idea. Knocking them all up out of their graves. Come forth, Lazarus! And he came fifth and lost the job" (U 6.677-79). The same happens while the priest follows the traditional ritual. Bloom's mental procedures are quite apart from the proper behaviour that is expected in this case:

—*Non intres in iudicium cum seruo tuo, Domine.*

Makes them feel more important to be prayed over in Latin. Requiem mass. Crape weepers. Blackedge notepaper. your name on the altarlist. Chilly place this. Want to feed well, sitting in there all the morning in the gloom kicking his heels waiting for the next please. Eyes of a toad too. What swells him up that way? Molly gets swelled after cabbage. (U 6.601-606)

A similar attitude is shown by Jake in *The Sun also Rises*, at the moment when the character goes in a church intending to pray, though his mental associations finally distract him from his purpose:

then I prayed for myself again, and while I was praying for myself I found I was getting sleepy, so I prayed that the bull-fights would be good, and that it would be a fine fiesta . . . I thought I would like to have some money, so I prayed that I would make a lot of money, and then I started to think how I would make it, and thinking of making money reminded me of the count, and I started wondering about where he was. . . . (103)

It is significant that the two characters experiment a progression in their thoughts, dealing with relevant matters and ending up in trivial issues, showing the characters' lack of concentration on the ritual. Bloom, as a matter of fact, is not a true Catholic, and Jake declares himself to be a "rotten Catholic" (103) so that neither of them believes himself to possess any authority to preserve the religious tradition, a tradition to which they absolutely do not belong.

Defamiliarization, thus, arises from a familiar experience or even familiar objects that are now portrayed as exotic and unknown devices to the character. The ironic attitude increases even more the degree of detachment, since the narrator is manipulating elements that the reader certainly knows, making him perceive such elements in the same manner the narrator perceives them. The scene of the mass in "Hades" is the most clear example.

Bloom describes the steps followed by the priest exactly as if he were attending a mass for the first time, using expressions such as "The priest took a stick with a knob at the end of it out of the boy's bucket and shook it over the coffin. Then he walked to the other end and shook it again. Then he came back and put it back in the bucket" (U 6.614-16), which describes the priest's tools in a simplistic manner and makes his service bear a striking resemblance to a ritual dance in Africa. Also, the sentence: "The priest closed his book" (U 6.631) obviously refers to the Bible, though the possessive "his" makes it clear that Bloom thinks he has very little to do with the priest's possessions. He also dares to offer his own translation of the Latin words used by the priest: "Said he was going to paradise or is in paradise" (U 6.629) and adds humorous comments that are totally irreverent: "Father Coffey. I knew his name was like a coffin. Dominenamine" (U 6.595). To sum up, Bloom's perception of the ceremony is closer to the description of a primitive ritual than to the Catholic mass, though in the end they mean the same for the character. On the other hand, Hemingway's description of the *riau-riau* dancers in *The Sun also Rises* cannot be more similar to Bloom's interpretation of the Catholic mass. Actually, Jake, like Bloom, depicts the Spanish dancers from a detached perspective, giving a full account of their garments in an objective way, without connecting himself to the scene:

Down the street came dancers. The street was solid with dancers, all men. They were all dancing in time behind their own fifers and drummers. They were a club of some sort, and all wore workmen's blue smocks, and red handkerchiefs around their necks, and carried a great banner on two poles. The banner danced up and down with them as they came down surrounded by the crowd. (158)

The climatic moment comes when they approach the protagonists of the novel:

They took Bill and me by the arms and put us in the circle. Bill started to dance, too. They were all chanting. Brett wanted to dance but they did not want her to. They wanted her as an image to dance around. When the song ended with the sharp *riau-riau!* they rushed us into a wine-shop. (159)

Jake names the Spanish dancers with the same words they emit in their clamours, typical in Pamplona, "*riau-riau.*" The narrator, however, makes the reader feel completely alien to the events at the same time that he perceives the celebration as a primitive rite where the Spanish dancers, of course, stand for the uncivilized aboriginal that have captured the American group.

At last, the description of the exotic reaches its climax in Conrad's novel, where the exotic is an actual foreign figure to the narrator. The particular technique often used by Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* conceals relevant information from the reader in order to offer a first sensorial impression of the events as they are first perceived by the narrator. As Ian Watt clarifies, the technique consists on a narrative device he names "delayed decoding," since, according to Watt, "it combines the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning."⁵

Certainly, Marlow's apprehension of reality is controlled by previous impressions that disconcert the narrator's interpretation of events. Sometimes it is the narrator himself who later finds out the meaning of the

experience, whereas other times, it is the reader who must make the effort to associate the episode with something familiar to him, as in the following fragment where Marlow describes the job of the fireman of the tribe:

He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge. He was useful because he had been instructed; and what he knew was this—that should the water in that transparent thing disappear the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry through the greatness of his thirst and take a terrible vengeance. (39)

As with the description of the Catholic mass or the customs of the Spanish dancers, Marlow portrays the job of this member of the tribe in a detached manner so that an occupation that should be familiar to the reader here receives magic overtones. Although there are numerous examples throughout the whole novel, one of the most interesting passages in order to understand the degree of distance between the narrator and the events he is accounting for is the episode of the attack. Actually, Marlow starts receiving some visual impressions of objects: "Sticks, little sticks, were flying about, thick; they were before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against a pilot-house" (45). Only at the end does Marlow realize what the "sticks" really are, though the reader has probably discovered it by the time Marlow gets to the solution: "Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at!" (46). The defamiliarization of the events in the narrator's eyes often provokes a comic effect that involves a sinister perspective. As the reader manages to interpret the true meaning of the episode that Marlow does not see at first sight, the narrative tone becomes ironic and morbid in a way, too, as in the example:

Something big appeared in the air before the shutter, the rifle went overboard, and the man stepped back swiftly, looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary, profound, familiar manner, and fell upon my feet. The side of his head hit the wheel twice, and the end of what appeared a long cane round and knocked over a little camp-stool. (317-18)

As Watt explains, in the macabre episode Marlow should assume that the dead man's posture is a signal of the crew's desertion in order to save their lives. Watt defends that one of the narrator's functions in *Heart of Darkness* is "to represent how much a man cannot know" (316), though he should add that Marlow's function in the story is also to pollute the readers with his delayed perceptions in such a way that events that would be easily understood become now totally unfamiliar, at least until the moment the reader is capable of reconstructing their true meaning.

It is relevant to note the simplistic vocabulary used in the three novels to describe situations and objects that appear to be unknown to the narrator, providing their versions of the stories with a childish touch, especially in the case of *Ulysses*. Indeed, the use of the word "stick" in "Hades," which also appears in Marlow's inexact description, as well as the insertion of jokes and jocular puns on words (Father Coffey/coffin, for instance), are accompanied by some scatological references which, as is well-known, are the easiest and most childish means of raising a laugh in the audience. Innocence, thus, also becomes distorted by the use of defamiliarization, which produces an uncanny effect.

As a matter of fact, the term "uncanny" was studied by Sigmund Freud with regards to something familiar that is deformed, turning into something strange that produces terror and fear.⁶ Freud elaborates on the etymology

of the term in order to prove that the designation “uncanny,” which comes from the German word *unheimlich*, meaning “unfamiliar,” is linked to its contrary, *heimlich*, which, after long research, is proved to mean both “familiar” and “secret, occult.”

The term “uncanny,” therefore, is intimately related to the use of defamiliarization in the sense that it is necessary to be based on something familiar in order to defamiliarize, as well as to have something familiar in order to be able to deform it and make it strange. The more familiar, the more terrifying it turns out to be. The most radical example of the use of familiarity to create terror, for example, occurs through the use of the *Doppelgänger* in Edgar Allan Poe’s “William Wilson.”⁷ The frightening element in the story is basically the fact that the protagonist sees himself as someone strange. The most familiar object to him, which is his own body, becomes a total alien to the character, detaching him not only from some other object exterior to him, but from his own self. The frightening element in *Heart of Darkness*, *Ulysses* or *The Sun also Rises* evidently is not so extreme, though there exists a certain sinister tone in the obscure way Bloom describes the priest doing his work, as well as in the manner Marlow describes the approach of the African people and also in the suspiciously glad dancing group that surrounds the characters in Jake’s account. In the three cases, the use of an innocent narrative serves to emphasize the exotic events as seen by the narrators, turning them from an innocent situation into a potentially threatening episode.

Defamiliarization, then, can only be achieved on a familiar base, and the reader must recognize that behind the story narrated, there lies another that may sound familiar to him. The Catholic traditions, in the case of Joyce, the Spanish “fiesta” in the case of Hemingway, and the instruments portrayed in Conrad’s narrative, are the elements chosen by these three authors to create something exotic and foreign for both the narrator and the reader by means of their distortion. The three authors also present characters who, in one way or another, feel themselves alienated from the context where they are placed. The distance created between the reader and the text, therefore, may be an attempt on the part of the novelists to make the reader notice the many difficulties they had to overcome in using the English language. This is especially significant in authors who, like Hemingway himself, devoted their lives to a perpetual strife to achieve the simplest and purest way of expression, or in authors like Conrad and Joyce, who had to use a language which did not belong to their native culture, thus inspiring tension and irony in their works.

Notes

1. David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1992) 53.
2. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, 3rd ed. (New York and London: Norton, 1988); Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun also Rises* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954); all subsequent references in the text will be to these editions.
3. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1961); henceforth cited parenthetically in the text. Booth comments on the use of dramatized narrators: “many novels dramatize their narrators with great fullness, making them into characters who are as vivid as those they tell us about” (152).
4. For the use of aporias see Lodge 219-22.
5. Ian Watt, “Impressionism and Surrealism in *Heart of Darkness*,” *Heart of Darkness* 317.
6. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, et al. 18: 7-64.
7. See Lodge 211-14.