

I I Defamiliarization

This picture, I say, seemed to consider itself the queen of the collection.

It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. I calculated that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed; very much butcher's meat – to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids – must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh. She lay half-reclined on a couch – why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed round her. She appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments – a gown covering her properly, which was not the case. Out of abundance of material – seven- and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery – she managed to make inefficient raiment. Then for the wretched untidiness surrounding her there could be no excuse. Pots and pans – perhaps I ought to say vases and goblets – were rolled here and there on the foreground; a perfect rubbish of flowers was mixed amongst them, and an absurd and disorderly mass of curtain upholstery smothered the couch and cumbered the floor. On referring to the catalogue, I found that this notable production bore the name "Cleopatra".

CHARLOTTE BRONTË *Villette* (1853)

DEFAMILIARIZATION

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 familiar things in unfamiliar ways:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war ... And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stony *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.

This theory vindicates the distortions and dislocations of modernist writing, but it applies equally well to the great exponents of the realistic novel. One of Shklovsky's examples was a passage where Tolstoy effectively ridicules opera by describing a performance as if through the eyes of someone who has never seen or heard an opera before (e.g., "Then still more people came running out and began to drag away the maiden who had been wearing a white dress but who now wore one of sky blue. They did not drag her off immediately, but sang with her for a long time before dragging her away"). Charlotte Brontë does something similar to *salon* art in the passage quoted here from *Villette*.

Villette is the fictional name of Brussels, where the heroine and narrator, Lucy Snowe, is obliged to earn her bread as teacher in a girls' boarding-school. She is secretly and hopelessly in love with an English doctor, John Bretton, who escorts her to art galleries but leaves her to explore them alone – an arrangement which suits her independent spirit.

The painting under observation here belongs to a recognizable type in which the lavish depiction of the female nude is, as it were, rendered respectable by its attachment to a mythical or historical source, by the intimidating grandeur of its scale, and by various other coded signs that it belongs to high culture. The contradictions in such a spectacle were, of course, much more marked in Charlotte Brontë's own day, when women were obliged to keep almost every inch of their bodies covered at all times, than they are

in ours. Through her heroine, Charlotte Brontë exposes these contradictions, and the essential falsity (as she saw it) of this kind of art, by describing the painting literally and truthfully, putting it in the context of the real life of women, and ignoring the discourse of art history and connoisseurship within which it is "habitually" perceived.

Thus the monumental size of the female figure and the superfluousness of drapery about her, facts ignored or suppressed in conventional art appreciation, are brought into the open by an empirical, quasi-scientific calculation of weight and quantity: "from fourteen to sixteen stone . . . seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery." We have become so familiar with the use of drapery in classical paintings of the nude, billowing round the figure in convoluted folds without covering anything except perhaps a few inches of pubic flesh, that we no longer perceive its essential artificiality. The same applies to the picturesque arrangement of various objects and utensils in the foreground of such paintings — why *are* those goblets invariably overturned on the floor, when the personages depicted would have had plenty of opportunity, or servants, to pick them up? Lucy's unblinking scrutiny raises questions habitually repressed in the ritual of gallery-visiting. The languorous reclining pose of the woman, with its tacit erotic invitation, is ridiculed by remarking on its incongruity with the time of day depicted, and the lack of any evidence of the subject's physical debility. And by holding back the title, "Cleopatra", till the end of her description, Lucy implies the arbitrariness and spuriousness of the historical/mythological justification claimed by the painting, which could just as well have been called "Dido" or "Delilah", or (more honestly) "Odalisque".

In itself, the description of the painting has no narrative content; the story "pauses" so that it may be delivered. But it does have a narrative *function*. Firstly, it contributes to the characterization of Lucy Snowe, a young woman of strong, independent and unconventional views, though her lack of beauty, status or wealth obliges her to keep them to herself most of the time. Secondly, it provokes an interesting scene with M. Paul Emmanuel, the testy, unprepossessing, but vital schoolmaster at Lucy's school, whom she in due

course recognizes as a much more fulfilling mate than the superficially eligible Dr John. Paul Emmanuel discovers her in front of the "Cleopatra" and is shocked — a reaction which shows him as immune to the cant of connoisseurship (he is not impressed by the painting's high cultural pretensions), but in thrall to gender stereotyping (he does not think it suitable for contemplation by a young lady). He drags Lucy off to look at another painting, of three sentimental scenes in the life of a virtuous woman, which she finds as absurd and irrelevant as the Cleopatra.

Villette was the last novel Charlotte Brontë wrote before her untimely death, and her most mature. It has become a key text in contemporary feminist criticism, for reasons that are very obvious in this passage. But in defamiliarizing the representation of women in historical painting Charlotte Brontë was making a point about art as well as about sexual politics, and specifically about her own art, which had gradually and painfully emancipated itself from the falsifications and wish-fulfillments of melodrama and romance. "It seemed to me," says Lucy Snowe just before this passage, "that an original and good picture was just as scarce as an original and good book." *Villette* is such a book.

What do we mean — it is a common term of praise — when we say that a book is "original"? Not, usually, that the writer has invented something without precedent, but that she has made us "perceive" what we already, in a conceptual sense, "know", by deviating from the conventional, habitual ways of representing reality. Defamiliarization, in short, is another word for "originality". I shall have recourse to it again in these glances at the art of fiction.