sporic homes is greatly facilitated by easy access to particular types of media and communication (206; see Manning 160). Moreover, given the importance for diasporic communities of everyday rituals of food preparation and consumption (Blunt and Dowling 216), it is clear that those who cannot afford the foodstuffs required are also excluded from communal rituals. We will revisit such considerations of the link between community, rituals, and forms of communication – as well as humankind’s relation to the natural world (e.g. through the construction of a pastoral space) – in the discussion in chapter six of Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides*.

**Knowing Home: The Uses and Abuses of Defamiliarization**

By way of concluding this introductory chapter, we need to explore briefly the importance of conventions for establishing a sense of home (as well as, more generally, the relation between home, familiarity, and knowledge). Commenting on the role of conventions, Theano S. Terkenli insists that it is precisely through repetition, routine, and ritual that we turn places into homes:

> [H]abits that repetitively unfold in specific contexts differentiate these locales or circumstances from the rest of the known world. [...] Over time an individual develops numerous behavioral, cognitive, and affective routines by investing resources and emotional commitment. The same process occurs at a group level in the creation of a collective home in the form of a common cultural background and a common homeland. (326)

The conventions and routines of home thus allow us to save both cognitive and affective energies, thus making it possible for us to employ these psychic energies for other purposes. This idea is not of recent origin, for as early as 1815, Percy Bysshe Shelley argued in his essay “On Life” that the “wonder of our being” is in a sense far too great, and that therefore we depend on a “mist of familiarity” that shields us “from an astonishment which would otherwise absorb and overawe” (633). In other words, the limited economy of psychic life renders familiarity eminently desirable.

At the same time, however, too much familiarity may blind us to the world around us, which is why the Russian Formalists and others before them insisted on a need for carefully administered doses of defamiliarization. The concept of defamiliarization or *ostranenie* (‘making strange’) was introduced by Victor Shklovsky in 1917 in an essay entitled “Art as Technique.” In this essay, Shklovsky suggests that when “perception becomes habitual,” it retreats “into the area of the unconsciously automatic” (19). To combat the resulting mental numbness, art must attempt to ‘de-habitualize’ perception:
The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (20)

According to Shklovsky, it is the form in which an object is presented in the work of art that forces us to perceive this object as if we were “seeing it for the first time” (21). In this way, defamiliarization may reveal the strangeness that lies hidden at the heart of the familiar – an idea that has prompted Nicholas Royle to observe that defamiliarization bears more than a passing resemblance both to Freud’s notion of the uncanny and to the Heideggerian concept of existential angst (4). Likewise, Royle points out, the idea that defamiliarization may revolutionize our way of perceiving the world underpins Bertolt Brecht’s concept of a Verfremdungs- or alienation effect (5). This point, too, had already been developed by Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his 1821 essay “A Defence of Poetry”:

[Poetry] strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms.

[... I]t purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. (698)

For Shelley, as for the Russian Formalists, it is poetry or art that re-infuses life and vitality into a universe annihilated by repetition, tearing the veil of familiarity from our eyes and thus allowing us to experience – and know – the world anew and, therefore, more profoundly.

In fact, the idea of familiarity as a threat to real understanding goes back even further, to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who claims, in the Preface to his Phenomenology of Spirit, that “the familiar, just because it is familiar, is not cognitively understood” (18; § 31). Indeed, Hegel even posits a need for the style of truly philosophical writing to be so unfamiliar and difficult that such texts might have to be read repeatedly before they can be understood (39; § 63–65). Importantly, whereas Shelley and the Russian Formalists tend to see in defami-
liarization the essence of ‘poetry’ or ‘literariness’ – i.e. a primarily aesthetic technique – for Hegel it is a necessary step in the acquisition of true knowledge as such, and thus not strictly speaking ‘merely’ an artistic, but instead a philosophical enterprise. In a sense, it is this idea that Oscar Wilde picks up on in his dialogue “The Critic as Artist,” where one of the interlocutors suggests:

An age that has no criticism is either an age in which art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types, or an age that possesses no art at all. [...] There has never been a creative age that has not been critical also. For it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. (254)

For Wilde’s speaker as much as for Hegel, the new, unexpected, and unfamiliar is thus not the effect of the creative impulse, but instead the product of the “critical faculty.”

In E. T. there is at least one scene that illustrates perfectly how it is possible implicitly to critique a particular state of affairs by confronting the audience with the familiar as seen through unfamiliar eyes. In the scene in question, Elliott tries to explain the contents of his room to E. T., but for the audience it is clear that the alien cannot but find Elliott’s explanations confusing:

Coke, see? We drink it. It’s, uh, it’s a drink. You know... food. [Showing E. T. two action figures.] These are toys. These are little men. This is Greedo, and then this is Hammerhead. [...] And look, they can even have wars. Look at this. [Taking two plastic fishes, a smaller one and a shark.] And look, fish. The fish eat the fish food. And the shark eats the fish. But nobody eats a shark. See, this is Pez. Candy. See, you eat it. You put the candy in here, and then when you lift up the head, the candy comes out, and you can eat it! You want some? [Pointing to his peanut-shaped piggybank.] Oh, this is a peanut. You eat it. But you can’t eat this one, ’cause this is fake. This is money. See? We put the money in the peanut. You see? Bank. You see? [Showing E. T. a tiny toy car.] And then this is a car. This is what we get around in. [Offering the toy car to E. T.] You see? (Mathison 68–69)

What on earth, for instance, is E. T. to make of the idea that we “put the money in the peanut”? And how is he to understand Elliott’s explanation that “this is a car. This is what we get around in” – given the fact that Elliott is showing him a toy car, which is far too small for any human to get around in? This notably comic scene in E. T. is, in short, also an exact application of one technique of defamiliarization that Shklovsky identifies in Tolstoy: making the familiar seem strange by prompting the audience to see things from an unfamiliar point of view, for example a horse’s (21) – or, as in our case, an extra-terrestrial’s. Sud-
denly we see the strangeness at the heart of a boy’s room: it harbors fantasies of war – the fighting action figures – and generally reflects a world where the small fish are eaten by the sharks, and which, already, revolves around money and, of course, cars: that ultimate symbol of individual freedom through consumption. Terry Eagleton thus rightly insists that we “can engage with the wider world simply by recording what goes on at home” (The English Novel 322) – provided that we manage to see the familiar as if we were perceiving it for the first time.

At the same time, even if we accept that defamiliarization is a necessary technique for any critical enterprise – very much including the present one – we should not therefore see it as the binary opposite of a desire to belong. Rather, as Hegel suggests, the ultimate “aim of knowledge is to divest the objective world that stands opposed to us of its strangeness, and, as the phrase is, to find ourselves at home in it” – and this, for Hegel, involves a dialectical return to belonging as a complement to previous acts of self-alienation (Logic 289; § 194).

It is, presumably, the same idea that the German poet Novalis wanted to express in a frequently quoted aphorism: “Philosophy is actually homesickness – the urge to be everywhere at home” (Philosophical Writings 135; original emphasis).

To relinquish the quest for a sense of home altogether would thus defeat the very purpose of defamiliarization. Moreover, as Terry Eagleton observes, to indulge in the denigration of home, the familiar, and the everyday is tantamount to accepting a peculiarly modernist bias against the common life: “In the transition from realism to modernism, a fascination with the texture of everyday living gives way to a mandarin scepticism of it. Common experience is now the locus of illusion, not of truth” (Trouble with Strangers 277). To assume, that is to say, that everything about the places we call home is false and coercive is just as problematic as blindly to accept everything that is familiar. When studying home, we may therefore want to bear in mind the words of Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s Inspector Bärlach when he talks about the idea of loving one’s country: “One should not be ashamed of one’s love, [...] only it has to be stern and critical.

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47 The German original runs: “Beim Erkennen ist es überhaupt darum zu tun, der uns gegenüberstehenden objektiven Welt ihre Fremdheit abzustreifen, uns, wie man zu sagen pflegt, in dieselbe zu finden” (Die Wissenschaft der Logik 351; § 195).

48 “Die Philosophie ist eigentlich Heimweh, ein Trieb überall zu Hause zu sein” (Schriften 179).

49 For an interesting recent overview of ideas concerning the concept of the everyday, see Bryony Randall, “A Day’s Time: The One-Day Novel and the Temporality of the Everyday” (2016).
otherwise it turns into the love of a monkey” (183; my translation).50 Home-making requires patience as well as, at times, critical effort. But ought we therefore to privilege the pain of unbelonging? It is this tension between alienation and belonging that lies at the heart of the six readings that follow, starting with *Moby-Dick* in chapter one.

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50 The German original runs: “Man soll sich seiner Liebe nicht schämen, […] nur muss sie streng und kritisch sein, sonst wird sie eine Affenliebe.” In English translations, the inspector’s last name is usually given as Barlach.