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Segmentation: From prose novel to verse novel

Abstract:

Poetic narratives are currently receiving renewed interest from narratologists who seek to redress a previous methodological gap; the lacunae brought about by the tradition of separating poetry and narrative in research. One direction taken by this research program aims to determine the constitutive feature of poetry. Segmentation has been proposed as the *dominant*, the intrinsic, constitutive element of poetry; the essential defining condition that makes poetry poetry (McHale). De-versification—recasting poetry as prose—has been one means by which to demonstrate how segmentation impacts on narrative.

A recent attempt by a creative writer to recast a prose novel as a verse novel, that is, to poeticise a prose text, provides an opportunity for this paper to critically reflect on segmentation and its relation to poetry by analysing its effects in the reinscribed text.

Biographical note:

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Keywords: Verse novels, poetic narratives, segmentation, poetry

Introduction

Recent scholarly interest in narrative-in-poetry is reinvigorating dialogue among narrative theorists about poetic elements, most conspicuously about poetry's 'dominant'. The *dominant* arose in the lexicon of Russian formalism, and was advanced in the thirties by Roman Jakobson who defined the term as: 'the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure ...' (1978: 82). The context for why the *dominant* of poetry should reemerge now, as an object of study, is in part attributable to Brian McHale's 2009 proposal for a programmatic study to theorise poetry's constitutive feature, or to 'at least form a working hypothesis' about it (14). McHale, extrapolating from Jakobson, posed the question: 'if *narrativity* is the term for the defining feature of narrative, and *performativity* (is the term) for the defining feature of performance' (14; emphasis original) then what should we call the dominant of poetry, the '*whatever it is*' that qualifies poetry as poetry (14). The constitutive feature is segmentation, McHale (after DuPlessis) maintains, the gaps which in poetry are crucial to produce meaning and often resist it too, the spacing that gives a word significance, that makes it signify (14).

The context in turn, for segmentation landing on the research agenda—an agenda extensive enough to deliver, in McHale's view, 'a capacious, big-tent theory of poetic narrative' (2009: 23)—is narratology's recognition of a research gap. Although there is a long tradition of reflecting on narrative-in-poetry as a field of inquiry, in recent years narrative theorists have come to realise that scant attention is actually being paid to the poetry in their working methods (McHale 2009; Kinney 1992).

These two gaps—the gaps that poetry crucially depends on, and the lacunae brought about by the tradition of separating poetry and narrative in research—are foreground in this paper which critically reflects on segmentation and its relation to poetry. I begin with a brief outline of how the neglect of poetic narratives in research provides context for the renewed interest in the gapping within poetry. This is followed by a definition and explanation of segmentation. I then describe research that employs the process of de-versification, or *dérimage*, to highlight how segmentation can impact on narrative. I compare and contrast these effects with an analysis of a recent attempt by a creative

writer to recast a prose novel as a verse novel. I analyse the extent to which segmenting the text achieves poeticisation— transforms its prose into poetry.

Poetic lacunae, segmentivity and setting a new agenda

Claire Kinney points out that investigations of poetic narratives tend to overlook or minimise analysis of poetic elements (1992: 3). She maintains that a poetic narrative ‘is prone to be treated as ontologically indistinguishable from a prose narrative’ (3). McHale observes that ‘even the indispensable poems, the ones that narrative theory seems unable to do without, tend to be treated as de facto prose fictions; the poetry drops out of the equation’ (2009: 11-12). Homer is an ‘honorary novelist’ for narrative theorists’ according to Kinney (1992: 3). ‘Pushkin must have been one too’ (2009: 12) quips McHale, since Bakhtin treats *Eugene Onegin* ‘as an exemplary novel’ (2009: 12). Bakhtin makes no mention of *Onegin*’s innovative stanzaic form—its fourteen line stanzas in iambic tetrameter with a rhyme scheme alternating masculine and feminine rhymes—a form that today still bears the name, the ‘Onegin stanza’.

Indeed it is with a mindfulness to redress this research gap that narrative scholars now seek poetry’s ‘dominant’. The importance of keeping poetry on the analyst’s agenda is explicit in Brian McAllister’s preface to a recent collection of articles on poetic narratives: ‘When considering narrative poetry through the lens of narrative theory, one cannot simply brush aside the poetic aspects of the text’ (2014: 151). The articles in question respond to McHale’s essay *Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry*. In *Beginning* McHale builds upon earlier theorising by Rachel DuPlessis (*Manifests*), to argue that poetry’s constitutively dominant concern, the whatever-it-is that makes poetry poetry, is its segmentivity (2009: 11-27).

For DuPlessis, a work’s poeticity arises in the interplay of page and text space. The interplay foregrounds combinations of gaps (which DuPlessis calls ‘scales’) at the level of letters, words, lines and stanzas. These combinations of segments and gaps interact with each other in counterpoint (or *countermeasurement*, a John Shoptaw term which McHale adopts), and produce systems of meaning or ‘chords’ (DuPlessis 1996: 51). ‘The specific force of any individual poem occurs in this intricate interplay’ (51), afforded by ‘scales’ and ‘chords’ and the variety of segments they offer.

McHale's concern with segmentivity is, moreover, a call for scholars to promote and extend work in the field. McHale believes there is much still to know about how poetry and narrative interact (2009: 23). In particular (McHale advocates) 'it would be useful to know more about what happens when the "same" poetic narrative is translated from language to language, or from one verse-form to another (see, e.g., Kinney 34-50, on the translation of Boccaccio's *rime royal* into the *ottava rima* of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*), or when a prose narrative is recast as verse, or the other way around (see, e.g., Kittay and Godzich (27-45), on medieval French *dérimage*, the "unrhyming" of verse)' (23). Thus research that 'reworks' poetic narratives and involves a physical change of material is central to the research agenda set forth by McHale.

Verse into prose – prose into verse

Historically the tradition of de-versification arose from the growing demand for vernacular prose in the thirteenth century (Spiegel 1993). Studies of the tradition enable comparison of verse reconstructed by prosifiers in earlier centuries (medieval and Renaissance). They examine how, for instance, prosifiers would identify and select certain poetic elements already within the text for reworking or modification.

In Catherine M. Jones' (2008) study of late medieval works of verse that were prosified by Philippe de Vigneulles, she notes the extent of and types of changes by comparing de-versified manuscripts with their original verse redactions. These include changes to the poetic template include line-by-line derhyming (93), and the replacement of stanzaic structure and rhyme schemes. Once the verse was reworked into prose, narrative divisions no longer corresponded with the stanzas of varying length in the verse sources (89). The new divisions between stanzas signalled shifts in point of view and deferred closure (89). Jones believes de Vigneulles differs from other prosifiers in this respect: they tend to condense or consolidate material into narrative units (89), resulting in 'significant differences in structure and segmentation' (89). The titles changed too, becoming up to three times longer and thereby adding an interpretative layer of essential narrative information to the text (92).

Philippe de Vigneulles also adds an overlay of synonyms. Such synonymic repetition in late medieval prose, Jane H.M. Taylor argues, functions for emphasis or persuasive

effect ('Translation as Reception' 501, cited in Jones 108). Most prominent are two synonym constructions known as binomials— examples of which are 'beg and beseech'; 'said and affirmed'; 'told and recounted'; 'dishonoured and shamed'; 'hurt and wounded'; 'contrite and repentant'; 'sated and full'; 'dressed up and adorned'— as well as three synonym constructions, or trinomials ('marvellously angered and unhappy') some of which function to clarify 'an archaic or unfamiliar term' (107) and some which build the cadence of the prose (107). Catherine M. Jones points out that in dialogue and narration, Philippe de Vigneulles often doubles binomials linked to discourse, that is, he doubles the verbs of speaking and telling. Notes by Philippe de Vigneulles in his manuscript also reveal concerns with time and space, both of which are profoundly modified in the shift from ... written verse to prose' (96). According to Jones, not only does de Vigneulles 'highlight the chronology of events by adding temporal conjunctions and adverbial phrases, particularly in the opening sentences of his chapters' (97), his prose converts the first sentence into a subordinate clause that emphasizes the causal relationship between perceiving and reacting' (996). Changes in tense are also noted.

Thus in rendering verse into prose, the prosifier strips away the artifice of poetic elements such as rhyme which do not have semantic function until the poem is 'unrhymed.' The verse is purposefully reworked into 'event-centered narrative prose' (93). Philippe de Vigneulles' *dérimage* situates characters in time and space before presenting their words or actions, envisioning a story world before introducing discourse. In adapting the text, de Vigneulles magnifies the actions or words of speaking subjects, whether they be character or authorial, in recognition of the imperative of transmission and reception in telling a story.

A recent use of *dérimage* enables continuity of this understanding. McHale (2012) recasts a passage from Les Murray's verse novel, *Fredy Neptune* into continuous prose, to assess how altering its segmentation effects the organisation of its narration. McHale's first step is to analyse his prosified excerpt then compare it with the verse version to determine the impact of the change in segmentation. McHale specifically comments on these changes, noting that in the transformation, the verse novel's poetic features become 'minimal, reduced to little more than lineation, stanza-breaks and sporadic end-rhymes' (2012).

Conversely, a third example studies the changes that occur when prose is poeticised. Leonard Bernstein in the final lecture of his 1973 Harvard Lecture Series, *The Unanswered Question, on The Poetry of Earth*, offers his theory on the framework of aesthetic surfaces in poetry and music. ‘The penultimate culmination for poetry’, he states, occurs when poetry achieves a super-surface structure. That is, Bernstein maintains, when the chosen and well matched poetic components are folded into the poem’s deep structure so as to enable the poetic concept or idea to reach its highest level or plane. Bernstein demonstrates how shifts between prosification and poeticisation of the same text alters semantic and syntactic functionality. He offers the following example: ‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously’ a line of free verse that he deems ‘poetically perfectly acceptable’. Bernstein proceeds to recreate a prose deep structure for this line:

Last night I slept badly; my usually colorless dreams were invaded by
sort of dirty-green ideas, which caused me to sleep fitfully and to toss
furiously. (1973)

Bernstein deems the transformations in the process of de-versification very simple, and reels them off like a set of instructions:

Delete all prosy elements such as narrative sequences and all connectives such as ‘and’ and ‘which’. Condense sleep and toss. Embed fitfully within furiously. The only remaining problem is that the ideas are now sleeping instead of me—but delete the causal factor as one always does in dreams anyway and you’ve got a dream image, a line of poetry borne of metaphorical transformations. What makes the whole thing possible is the basic implication of the dream—once that’s implied everything else works at a linguistic level. (1973)

The resultant text foregrounds Bernstein’s line of free verse, ‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously’:

~~Last night I slept badly; my usually colorless dreams were invaded by~~

~~sort of dirty-green ideas, which caused me to sleep fitfully and to toss furiously.~~ (1973)

Though they are local and particular, each of these three examples assert a continuity of understanding: that the prosification of a poem, or conversely, the poeticisation of prose will necessarily result in changes to the semantic and syntactic templates of the texts.

Prose into verse: is segmentation sufficient?

What transformations would rework prose to make it poetic? If one were to poeticise a novel for instance—(too onerous a task, and why would you bother, surely?)—yet hypothetically one could ask: what might the task of poeticising reveal about what is constitutive to poetry, about what qualifies poetry as poetry? That a writer has done just that—recast a prose novel into a ‘verse novel’—provides a random opportunity to critically reflect on segmentation as the *differentia specifica* of poetry, what qualifies it as poetry. The text in question is designated a ‘Verse Novel in Stanzas’. It has the title *Depth of Focus: The Stanzas*. The author first produced the work of fiction in prose, and called it *Depth of Focus: The Novel*.¹

To see what difference segmentation makes, in what follows I compare the opening pages of the ‘novel version’ with the corresponding pages in the ‘Stanzas version.’ To what extent (if at all) does segmentation transform the text? What affordances or potentialities arise from this reinscription?²

Excerpt 1 Prose

CHILDREN’S CHEERS AND giggling vitalized the normally quiet Tuttle dining room. It was the fifteenth – Danni’s birthday. The balloons were filled. Streamers were hung. Preschoolers played. New friends were made. And in the backyard, an exuberant game of tag was being waged. Five-year old Danni got up on her tiptoes – sporting the new, powder blue dress her mother had insisted she wear. She stretched for the manual camera which was always just

out of reach. On the top of the dresser, its boxy shape beckoned to be explored. More tantalizing than the promise of any gift-wrapped toy, what happened *inside* the metal silver and black contraption intrigued her. Black and white portraits and color snapshots – often of *them* or from her father’s sudden travels abroad – had been hidden from almost everyone’s view. Only a few had been framed. The rest were quickly destroyed. (Williamson 2012a: 3-4)

Excerpt 1 ‘The Stanzas’

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Only a few had been framed.

The rest were quickly destroyed. (Williamson 2012b: 3-4)

Excerpt 2 Prose

“Don't, Danni. You'll break it,” Marnie shooed her
away. The former homecoming queen's premature worry
lines and wrinkles, poorly hidden under overpriced
moisturizer and makeup, only made Danni's mother appear
much older than her thirty-one years. Suspicions of multiple
extramarital affairs had depleted her. And ideas more somber
than those had consumed her waking hours.

“Now, you just turn the ring until everything you see
looks clear.” (Williamson 2012a: 4)

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Of immediate consequence is the change to the material rendering of the text—the change in typographical layout—from a ‘block’ of prose text, to the white-space-predominant organisation of text on the page in the ‘Stanzas version’. A preponderance of short and medium segments push apart clause and dependent clause, until all sentences but a few, straddle several lines. This doubles the number of lines: in excerpt 1 from sixteen in the prose version, to thirty-five in the ‘stanzas’ version, and in excerpt 2 from nine in the prose version, to eighteen in the ‘stanzas’ version. Segmentation thus prolongs the narrative material—that is, the events, sequences, and shifts of voice and focalisation—slowing down the presentation of events and deferring narrative progression, not only the unfolding temporal development of the text but additionally the audience response to that movement, the readers’ shifting interest and attention.

This paper has been referring to the ‘Stanzas version’ in inverted commas. A stanza is the name given to a block of formal poetry of given dimensions (the number of lines in each). In fixed or named stanzas, the rhyme scheme or metre is specified.³ Free verse can utilise stanzas which need not follow given dimensions—nevertheless stanzas create regular visual patterns on the page. The white space divisions or breaks in the ‘Stanzas

version' are, by contrast, irregular, occurring after five lines, eight lines, nine lines or after fourteen lines; in other words, while white space breaks the layout, it does so without adherence to a regular pattern of gaps in its arrangement.

An analysis of rhyme in the 'Stanzas version' excerpt 1 locates one pair of perfect rhymes end stopped in their lines: 'played' and 'made'. The final words of lines nine, ten and thirteen build on this assonance: 'played', 'made', 'game', 'waged'. Two consonant rhymes in the end position of lines 'sudden'/'hidden' add further iteration. Excerpt 2 contains two instances of imperfect rhyme: 'appear', 'years', 'clear' and 'ring'/'everything'. In the prose version, these rhymes are not apparent, are irrelevant, and less audible. Segmentation deposits these rhymes to end-stopped positions, at grammatical boundaries or line breaks, where punctuation brings the clause, the phrase, and the narrative unit of action, to closure (Preschoolers played. New friends were made. And / in the backyard, an exuberant game / of tag was being waged.) The relocation functionalises the rhymes, enabling emphasis of their non-semantic patterns, making them audible, amplified. Nevertheless these instances of rhyme lack regular arrangement or discernible repetition throughout the 'Stanzas version'.

The author states 'the stanzas reveal their rhythm' (Williamson 2012b). Rhythm occurs when a group of elements, usually sound patterns, are repeated throughout a poem. Because the 'Stanzas version' does not have iterated syllabic groups, and is not metrical, that is, it does not contain regular arrangement of stress patterns, the rhythm to which the author refers, can therefore, only be the patterning of rhythm in natural speech during recitation. Jakobson however, makes clear, how a poem is *recited* for sense and effect, however, is not the same as rhythm; rhythm is a quality within a given poem, a verse instance; and must be distinguishable from variable delivery instances, different performance (Jakobson 1960: 13).

Segmentation in the 'Stanzas version' foregrounds very short lines, lines comprising one or two words. Both excerpts contain single word lines; there are thirteen instances of single word lines between them. A further six lines have two words: 'which was' 'More tantalizing' 'mother appear' 'depleted her' 'until everything' 'you see'. In the prose version these words fulfil their syntactic function with no additional emphasis: three are nouns, two are verbs in the past perfect tense, and the remainder are a proper

noun, a personal pronoun, a conjunction, an adjective of frequency, a linking verb, and an adjective. Segmentation forces these words into prominence (SHE; WERE; AND; WHICH etc) additional signification that concentrates their meaning. That is, although the single word lines and the double word lines are amplified, despite the emphasis they receive, the poem does not derive impressive effects from the segmentation. Segmentation here counters a principled arrangement of content; this in turn impedes coherence. If segmentation defers the production of meaning, then the undue emphasis on words that do not contribute semantically, proves futile and confounds that deferral.

Describing how verse segments impact on the reading process, McHale (2014) maintains, ‘verse *continues*—from one metrical unit to the next, from one line to the next, from one stanza to the next, and so on ... The ongoing flow of verse is interrupted (if only momentarily) at the end of a segment, but that interruption is immediately overcome. Verse induces us to *lean forward* in anticipation of the completion of the pattern, or its repetition (the *next* foot, the *next* line, etc) on the other side of the break’ (emphasis original: 285). With ‘The Stanzas’, the visual impression that poetry is segmented though useful as an initial differentiation, is not enough. The text is prosaic and remains so, after being segmented to resemble a poem. Once the reader intuits this, there is a tendency to read against the segmentation, to ignore the gaps, and read the text as its prosaic imperatives demand. Implicit in this counter-reading is the recognition— that the segmentation did not lead to ‘the creation of meaningful sequence’ (1996: 51) that DuPlessis maintains it should.

The creative writer’s approach assumes that poetic storytelling is distinguishable from prose storytelling merely by its segmentation, that gaps created by shorter and variable line lengths will effect a transformation from a novel to a verse novel. Yet segmentation is the only consistent poetic feature in the ‘Stanzas version’. That is why trying to analyse it in contradistinction to the ‘prose version’ merely foregrounds their similarity not their difference. But what is more intriguing is the premise for this writer’s approach: was it based on a view that segmentation was sufficient a condition for poetry, or a view that segmentation was a necessary condition for poetry?⁴

Following Jahn (2002) a critical thinking web (Lau, J & Chan J 2004-2014) can assist understanding of how segmentation and poetry relate to each other. This relation can

be expressed in four ways: segmentation is necessary but not sufficient a condition for poetry; segmentation is sufficient but not necessary for poetry; segmentation is both a necessary and sufficient condition for poetry (or jointly necessary and sufficient); or segmentation is neither necessary nor sufficient for poetry.

To say that segmentation is a necessary condition for poetry means that it is impossible to have poetry without segmentation. To show otherwise would require a poem that does not have segmentation. McHale has pointed out that all poetry is segmented; even a prose poem is segmented, even if it is a zero-degree example, equivalent to the segmentation of prose (2009: 23). Since all poems then have segmentation, segmentation is a necessary, or essential condition.

Is segmentation a sufficient condition for poetry? To be so, the presence of segmentation would have to guarantee the presence of poetry. In other words, if a text is segmented then it must be poetry. If it is not sufficient a condition for poetry, then we must show instances where segmentation is present, but poetry is not: a shopping list for instance.

Conclusion

That a writer decided to convert a prose novel into a verse novel by segmenting the text—without any corresponding change to syntax or content—provided an opportunity to assess the extent to which this reworking poeticised the novel, transformed its prose into poetry. In this reworking the sole affordance of segmentation arose from its potential as a ‘necessary condition’ for poetry.

The relevance and usefulness to creative writing theory and practice of this inquiry—which may seem to some a formalist exercise—is severalfold. Creative writing students necessarily learn to appraise the affordances of poetic and narrative elements, to deduce which will best deliver their intentions and fulfil the creative potential of their work. Teachers of creative writing elicit and guide the development of these understandings in their students. More broadly, understanding the relation of poetic and narrative elements is essential to verse novel reception and research, since the form is held accountable in both respects of its design, as a novel and as a poem. And furthermore, there is inherent value in tracing shifts in the ongoing interplay between poetic and

narrative elements, as Jakobson himself makes clear when he states it is the shifting dominant, moreover, that ultimately informs our understanding of poetic norms (1978: 85).

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Endnotes:

1 In 2012 the author released a combined volume. This new book is pitched as 'poetic fiction' and has the title *Depth of Focus: The Stanzas & A Novel*. This version contains 348 pages of 'stanzas' followed by the same story told in 260 pages of prose paragraphs (Williamson 2012c).

2 The concept of affordances derives from software design. It has been applied in perceptual psychology (JJ Gibson) and the psychology of design objects (Norman), and to stanzaic form (McHale 2012).

3 Named stanzas include the couplet, the triplet, Terza rima, the quatrain or four-line stanza, the ballad stanza, the heroic or elegiac stanza, the In Memoriam stanza, Sapphic

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stanzas, cinquains, sextets, septets, octets, Mad Song stanza, Rime couée, Burns stanza, Sesta rima, Venus and Adonis stanza, Rime royale, Ottava rima, Spenserian stanza etc.

4 Jahn applies the terms 'sufficient condition' (if this text is written in verse then it must be poetry), and 'necessary condition' (if this is poetry then it must have verses) (Jahn P1.1).