CREATIVE WRITING AND STYLISTICS

CREATIVE AND CRITICAL APPROACHES

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APPROACHES to WRITING

Stylistics and the Craft of Creative Writing

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'Creativity is strong only when critical thinking is weak, or vice versa.'

Peter Elbow (1998: 9)

Combining 'theory' and practice?

'Writers are often … insulated from other writing, especially writing about fiction, literary criticism or literary theory. This, especially the latter, is seen as some sort of bloodless, life-draining pursuit: a parasite practice that writers must avoid lest they too be sucked dry of the true life-force of writing. … There are hundreds of incisive, inspirational ideas in which has been termed 'theory' or even worse 'criticism', and these ideas can enrich the process of fiction writing. **Even if, as writers, we reject them utterly, we can still find inspiration from our disagreement**.' [My emphasis]

Amanda Boulter (2007: 5)

'[One of the] chief feature[s] of stylistics is that it persists in the attempt *to understand technique, or the craft of writing*. … **Why these word-choices, clause-patterns, rhythms and intonations, contextual implications, cohesive links, choices of voice and perspective and transitivity etc. etc., and not any of the others imaginable?** Conversely, can we locate the linguistic bases of some aspects of weak writing, bad poetry, the confusing and the banal?

Stylistics asserts we should be able to, particularly by bringing to the close examination of the linguistic particularities of a text an understanding of the anatomy and functions of the language. … Stylistics is crucially concerned with excellence of technique.' [My emphasis]
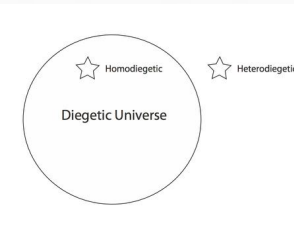
(Michael Toolan, 1998: ix)

Why stylistics?*

*with a sprinkling of narratology…

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1. Point of view (who tells?)
2. Focalisation (who sees?)
3. Linguistic deviation
4. Stylistic balance
5. Metaphor
6. Presenting speech

Overview

Who **tells**?
- First person (homodiegetic)
- Third person (heterodiegetic)
- Omniscient?
- Restricted?
- Authorial?
- Character?

Homodiegetic   Heterodiegetic

Diegetic Universe

Point of view

- Take a story you have already already begun (or completed) and rewrite the opening, changing the point of view from heterodiegetic to homodiegetic, or vice versa.
  - What kinds of changes in language use/style seem to flow from the shift in point of view?
  - Consider them *in linguistic terms,* and the ways in which theses changes affect the overall expressive function of the piece:
    - **DEIXIS (language that points to the time, place or situation in which a speaker is speaking; e.g. *this, then, here, yesterday*)**
    - **MODALITY (conditionals, hypothesis, attitude; e.g. *would, may, should*)**
    - **REGISTER (language variety; e.g. formality, slang, dialect, the demotic)**
    - **EVALUATIVE LANGUAGE (expressing a speaker's opinion, e.g. adjectives, adverbs, manner)**
    - **TENSE (past, present, future?)**

Textual intervention, or creative re-writing

Fact is the car needs to be sold in a hurry, and Leo sends Toni out to do it. Toni is smart and has personality. She used to sell children's encyclopaedias door to door. She signed him up, even though he didn't have kids. Afterward, Leo asked her for a date, and the date led to this. This deal has to be cash, and it has to be done tonight. Tomorrow somebody they owe might slap a lien on the car. Monday they'll be in court, home free— but word on them went out yesterday, when their lawyer mailed the letters of intention. The hearing on Monday is nothing to worry about, the lawyer has said. They'll be asked some questions, and they'll sign some papers, and that's it. But sell the convertible, he said—today, *tonight*. They can hold onto the little car, Leo's car, no problem. But they go into court with that big convertible, the court will take it, and that's that. (Raymond Carver, 'Are These Actual Miles?')

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Leo and Toni needed to sell their car as quickly as possible. Toni used to have a job as a door-to-door salesperson, selling children's encyclopaedias. She managed to get Leo a job doing the same thing, even though Leo didn't have any children. And that's how they met. Leo asked her out for a date after his first day on the job, and they've been together ever since.

They needed to sell the car for cash, and they needed to do it at once. They owed some money, and the bailiffs might have put a possession order on the car at any moment. They were due in court on the following Monday. Their lawyer had told them not to worry about it. They would be asked some questions, and then sign some papers, and that would be that. But he'd told them to sell the convertible. As soon as possible. It would be fine to hang onto Leo's little car, but if they turned up at court driving a huge convertible car, it would be re-possessed straight away and that would be that.

Some stylistic questions to consider:

• What grammatical and syntactical changes are necessitated?
• What is lost (in expressive terms, in terms of world creation, and in terms of the reader's experience of the narrative) and what is gained?
• Is it possible to transform a character idiolect (an individual way of using language) into an exterior narrative voice (as, arguably, is happening the Carver story?) What happens in expressive terms when you do this (if you can)?

Who **sees**?

- Fixed
- Variable
- Multiple
- Attenuated

Focalisation

He rested his arms on the top of the wall and looked down the fifty feet or so to the tumbling white waters. Just upstream, the river Loran piled down from the forest in a compactly furious cataract. The spray was a taste. Beneath, the river surged round the piers of the viaduct that carried the railway on towards Lochgilpead and Gallanach.

A grey shape flitted silently across the view, from falls to bridge, then zoomed, turned in the air and swept into the cutting on the far bank of the river, as though it was a soft fragment of the train's steam that had momentarily lost its way and was not hurrying to catch up. He waited a moment, and the owl hooted once, from inside the dark constituency of the forest. He smiled, took a deep breath that tasted of steam and the sweet sharpness of pine resin, and then turned away, and went back to pick up his bags. (Iain Banks, *The Crow Road*)

I rested my arms on the top of the wall … and **I** waited a moment … **I** smiled and took a deep breath … and went back to pick up **my** bags.

An owl flitted silently across the view, from falls to bridge…

Write a short story or poem from one of the following prompts:

•A wheelchair-bound woman spends her day behind the same window
•Three different people witness an assassination in a restaurant from three different locations in the room

As you will have noticed, each prompt suggests different approaches to point of view and focalisation. Which did you choose, and why?

As a general rule, anyone who wishes to investigate the significance and value of a work of art must concentrate on the element of interest and surprise, rather than on the automatic pattern. Such deviations from linguistic or other socially accepted norms have been given the special name of 'foregrounding', which invokes the analogy of a figure seen against a background. The artistic deviation 'sticks out' from its background, the automatic system, like a figure in the foreground of a visual field.

Geoffrey Leech (1969: 57)

Linguistic deviation

'Selina came at me in *queries* of pink smoke'
'The splayed, eviscerated suitcase'
'Her *ferociously tanned* hair hung in solid curves over the *vulnerable valves* of her throat and its *buzzing body-tone*'
'Tuxed fucks'
    London Fields, Martin Amis

Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow (*Othello*, 5.2.3)

tumbl

ing through wonder
ful sunlight
 (e.e.cummings)

this is thi
six a clock
news thi
man said n
thi reason
a talk wia
BBC accent
iz coz yi
widny wahnt
mi ti talk
aboot thi
trooth wia
voice lik
wanna yoo
scruff. (Tom Leonard)

ONCE I LIVED IN CAPITALS
MY LIFE INTENSELY PHALLIC
but now i'm sadly lowercase
with the occasional *italic*
                (Roger McGough)

Write two stanzas of poetry, putting in as many linguistically deviant features as practicable. Examine the results, concentrating on grammatical features that seem expressly 'poetic' in nature. Now re-write the piece, aiming to smooth away those aspects which you think are excessive, and consider rigorously and in stylistic terms why you have deemed them so. What happens if the poem is re-written in as 'standard' a discourse as possible? What judgements have you brought into play to decide whether language is standard or not? How does an awareness of these judgements question the existence of a **unitary language**?

Consider the suggestion that the very 'effervescence' of some styles can divert attention away from the story world and lead to undue focus on the language (discourse) itself. We look *at* the language, rather than 'through' it. Is this more of an issue (if it's an issue at all) in fiction than in poetry? Is the reader more accepting of deviation in poetry than in fiction? If so, why?

Slide 1

1. 'Seeing through language' into a fictional world (the metaphor of creative writing discourse as window)
2. The tension between which which aspires to a kind of *transparency* and that which relies upon *opacity* (the window can be clear – as possible – or flawed and distorting in some way)

Mimesis?		Diegesis?
The world we see		The world we write
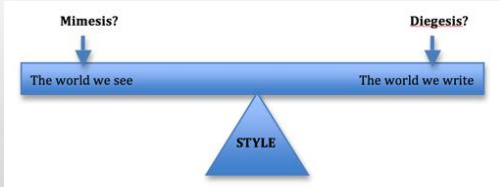
STYLE

Stylistic balance

Adapted from Boulter 2007: 76-7

Slide 2

3. Does emphasis on one side of the see-saw (e.g. through a strident, overt and highly-deviant style) lead to a *lessening* of focus on the other side (the imaginative world as 'seen' by the reader)?

4. The dangers of stylistic inventiveness for its own sake?

5. Does a highly 'effervescent' style divert attention from the story world?

6. Or is some sort of 'alienation' of the reader in fact desirable in this particular case?

'Real imaginative achievements – the things that are brilliant, just right and deserve our applause – are closer to what might call the banal than the fantastic.' (Trevor Pateman, 1997)

Where along the plank of the see-saw is our work positioned?
And is it in the right place?

Slide 3

I've had to guess at her/sewing her skin together as I sew mine

Rhetorical approach:

Tenor: the 'target' to which attributes are ascribed

Vehicle: from which attributes are borrowed

Ground: the characteristics which the tenor and vehicle hold in common

Metaphor

Slide 4

HOUSE: I'm a night owl, Wilson's an early bird.
We're different species.
CUDDY: Then move him into his own cage.
HOUSE: Who'll clean the droppings from mine?

'A simile compressed in a word' Samuel Johnson

Extended metaphor...

Slide 5

Conceptual metaphors involve systematic sets of correspondences between a **source** conceptual domain (e.g. JOURNEY) and a **target** conceptual domain (e.g. LIFE), and typically enable us to make sense of abstract, complex, or poorly delineated experiences (such as time and emotions) in terms of more concrete, simple and well delineated experiences (such as movement in space or containers). (Elena Semino, 2007: 160 [my emphasis])

Conceptual Metaphor Theory   Blending Theory

Slide 6
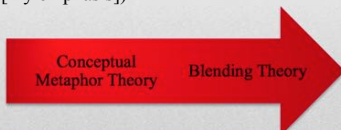
I've reached the end of the road.

She's lost her way.

I think we need to go our separate ways.

My life is going nowhere.

We're at a crossroads.

Try not to let anyone get in your way.

This guy is really going places.

Cliché?

emergent meaning

Try rewriting the following metaphors *literally* (i.e. without evoking any blend of source and target):

Dr House is a night owl.

My new boss has been showing me the ropes.

My life is going nowhere.

My love is like a red rose

Juliet is the sun.

Why should I let the toad work squat on my life?

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1. Look at the following prompt:

Your eyes are…
I cried…
Love is...
That Autumn was...
The journey was...

Continue each of these as a short metaphor. The challenge is to avoid cliché at all costs. When you are happy with the results, try extending the metaphor with one line. You should then aim to refine and distil the results, referring again to issues raised in previous chapters about diegesis versus mimesis and trust of the reader's imaginative capabilities.

2. Think of a hobby or pastime that you are familiar with and, ideally, partake in (e.g. photography, playing or watching sports, home brewing etc.). Now use the lexical field associated with that hobby to create an extended metaphor from prompt nouns taken from Lakoff. 'Love' combined with 'football', 'Time' with 'role playing games', 'Death' with 'graffiti art' – the more disparate the two, the more interesting the exercise. Is it true also that the more disparate the target and source, the more effective the results? If so, why?

'I'll be here tomorrow and that's a promise.'	Free Direct Speech
'I'll be here tomorrow and that's a promise' she said.	Direct Speech
She promised she would be there the next day.	Indirect Speech
She would be there the next day and that was a promise.	Free Indirect Speech
She made a promise. (?)	Narrator's Representation of Speech
She looked him straight in the eyes.	Narrator's Representation of Action

Presenting speech

Convert the following examples from IS to FDS, paying attention to the way in which the latter version should seek to *show* the features of speech and articulation (mimesis) which are 'told' in the original (diegesis):

1. The driver addressed me abruptly, asking if I was from Kent.
2. David queried the meaning of the word 'discourse'.
3. As he opened the door, he told her to move over.
4. Roughly, Carl said she should stop being so stupid.

Now try converting following example of DS to ID:

1. "So he says," Mrs. Peters gossiped, "'Annie wouldn't have done that,' he says, so I says, 'Blast, and she would.' And so she would."
2. He insisted on putting the car into the barn for me, so I got out and directed him into the narrow space.

Which method works best in each case? Why?

Reflections and applications

- Pedagogical applications (including for workshopping and creative writing assessment)
- However: interesting applications 'at the coalface' too (most obviously in editorial process, but also during practice?)
- A creative writing 'body of knowledge' (meta-discourses)
- Resistance to the over-theorising of practice (but perhaps energy can be found in disagreement)
- Creative writing is not *just* about language…
- But engagement with language studies can illustrate and elucidate some central aspects of creative writing craft
- Bridging the disciplinary divide between creative writing and language studies?
- A complimentary, dialogical approach…

'Learning is always a little bit transgressive, and what we learn around the edges of . . . established disciplines often sticks more than what we learn when we're in harness.' (Gerber, 2004)

Selected references

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