

## 11. The poem as a site of inherited structures and artistic innovation

Sissel Furuseth

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim

### 1. Introduction

Linguists and literary scholars, dedicated to studies of verbal expression, share a common interest in the structures of language and representation. The questions we ask when confronted with these structures, however, are often quite different. Whereas the linguist seeks to develop precise taxonomies and systems of verse description usually aimed at illuminating the general phonological and syntactic structures (and history) of language, the literary scholar is primarily concerned with the singular poetic event and the hermeneutic question of how verse structures contribute to the aesthetic meaning of a particular poem. Linguistically oriented metrics and literary oriented metrics have different priorities when approaching a piece of verbal expression, either emphasizing the general rules or the particular case. Such differences in focus can be regarded as a reasonable division of labor, as long as both enterprises share a common understanding of language as system (*langue*) and usage (*parole*), structure and event.

The general/particular dichotomy defines the theoretical discourses of both disciplines. In verbal art, however, the “particular” event has a slightly different character than in everyday language, as the aesthetic dimension complicates the structure/event issue to some extent. Consequently, literary scholars have to address the question of hermeneutical implications that arise from the fact that a poem is a singular and unique act of art and at the same time constructed of established and even well-worn linguistic and metrical patterns. This is the paradox the title of my chapter refers to, and which I will dwell upon in what follows. I will shed some light on the functionality and explanatory adequacy of the theoretical frameworks that we relate to in our verse studies, first and foremost addressing the question of how to approach the nexus between verbal patterns and aesthetic effects.

For decades the Formalist concept of *defamiliarization* (Viktor Shklovsky) and the Structuralist *principle of equivalence* (Roman Jakobson) have been most useful to literary scholars whose interest

lies in teasing out the contributions meter makes to the meaning of a poem. Structuralism has also, at least until the post-structuralist turn in the 1970s and 1980s, been a common theoretical platform for interdisciplinary dialogue, a *lingua franca*, so to speak, shared by both linguists and literary critics. Now in the Age of Cognitive Science, it seems that cognitive semiotics might serve as a new theoretical foundation for cross-disciplinary dialogue on poetic verse. According to the pioneer of Cognitive Poetics, Reuven Tsur, the new enterprise “offers cognitive theories that systematically account for the relationship between the structure of literary texts and their perceived effects” (Tsur 1992a:1). My own approach to cognitive poetics is primarily based on Tsur’s works, since he takes into consideration a broad range of all the traits of poetry (imagery, diction, rhythm, etc.), but I have also relied on linguists such as Ray Jackendoff and Richard Cureton, as well as Scandinavian scholars of free verse (most recently Frank Kjørup), scholars who have made important theoretical contributions of particular relevance to studies of rhythm in verse.

To illuminate the theoretical points that are made, I will include examples from the writings of Henrik Wergeland and Olav H. Hauge, two Norwegian poets who have recently celebrated their 200<sup>th</sup> and 100<sup>th</sup> anniversaries, respectively.<sup>1</sup> However, before we immerse ourselves in the poetry of Wergeland and Hauge and explore what interpretive benefits can be derived from cognitive poetics it is important first to recall the main points in Jakobson’s lecture on linguistics and poetics and Shklovsky’s essay on aesthetic effect. As the chapter progresses, it will become clear that these theorists have had a significant influence on Tsur’s conception of cognitive poetics, an influence made explicit by Tsur himself on several occasions (cf. Tsur 1992a:4-5).

## **2. Equivalence principle and analogizing**

At a conference on Style at Indiana University in Bloomington that took place in April 1958, Roman Jakobson delivered his legendary closing statement on “Linguistics and Poetics”, in which he defined in linguistic terms what makes a verbal message a work of art. The

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<sup>1</sup> The Romanticist writer Henrik Arnold Wergeland was born in Kristiansand on 17 June 1808 (d. 12 July 1845), while the Imagist poet Olav Håkonson Hauge was born in Ulvik in Hardanger on 18 August 1908 (d. 23 May 1994).

In any case, the sentence above is divided by two line-breaks, which constitute the verse units and hence create three separate perceptory units: the first causes the reader to imagine 'the tents of truth', and then suddenly, by introducing a negative adverbial phrase in the next line, the reader is forced to adjust the image since the tents appear *not* to have been pitched/stretched out (*ikke spændt*) after all. However, the third line continues somewhat paradoxically to provide a further description of the tents (in the detail of their shining) that in the previous line are said not to have been pitched on every mountainside/cliff.

In both the English translations, however, the negative "not" in the adverbial phrase precedes the object. Consequently, the lingering and the effect of surprise fail to be enacted.

Why are **not** her white tents planted, / Oh, / why then does it **not** pitch camp > [/]  
 Far and wide, / tent on tent > [/]  
 Gleaming on the mountain side? // white on every mountainside? //

In terms of cognitive poetics, the translated versions seem to call for more rapid categorization than the original. Gathorne-Hardy has even let the lines coincide with syntactic clauses, and thus the verse line loses some of its own perceptual existence.

## 6. Structure and event

"The Army of Truth" is a meta-poetical text in the sense that it addresses the very conditions by which language and poetry as such come into being. In the poem, words not only serve the case of truth, but also defend their own existence as constituent elements in a versified structure. In the opening stanza poetry is described in terms of a persecuted minority: "Words? Those sounds the world despises./ Words in poems?/ Even more to be disdained!/ Ah, how feeble are your powers/ to defend/ all the truth that man denies!" (Wergeland 2003:3). The poet's response to this disparagement is nevertheless a positive one: "Forward, though, you feeble lines!" Versified language may be a minority language, but as a consequence it has to fight for its very existence.

In similar terms, Frank Kjørup formulates an ontology of verse, a defense of poetry, so to speak, based on the conception of the verse-syntax counterpoint:

Since language can exist without verse, but not the other way around, the latter system is forced into a struggle for its very existence, conceptually as well as perceptually, by challenging the basic structural, meaning-generating unit of language, that is, the sentence, by resisting systematic conformity to the boundaries constituting that very unit. (Kjørup 2008:99)

In “The Army of Truth” the forces of versification are addressed explicitly at the semantic level as well as displayed formally in their metrical structures, where they are supposed to work as perceptual events. The question of how to empower “feeble lines”, how best to deploy words to make a difference in the real world, can only be answered within the poem itself, in a verse structure that is packed with verbal and metrical energy.

In the introduction to this chapter I referred to the division of labor between linguists and literary scholars, and to their tendency to ask different questions when approaching verbal expression. To be sure, literary scholars may utilize clear-cut concepts and precise tools of description from linguistics to reveal the general underlying structures of a text in as high a pattern of resolution as possible. Nevertheless, the hermeneutical activity that is at the core of literary analysis simply does not allow us to overlook the particularity of literature, that is, its event-character. Echoing Shklovsky’s slogan in “Art as Technique”, Derek Attridge has reiterated that what constitutes the artistic sphere is precisely that of an event: in his phrase, creative works “happen to us” (Attridge 2004:127). A poem is always singular, and the singularity of literature “is not a property but an event, the event of singularizing which takes place in reception” (Attridge 2004:64). It is precisely such events of reader-response which have attracted the attention of Tsur and other scholars within the field of cognitive poetics, who have yielded powerful and valuable insights in how the meaning of poetry, and the meaning of verse, in particular, might be dealt with as perceptual phenomena.

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