A Genealogy of the Verse Novel

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For John Hulcoop

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INTRODUCTION

Vikram Seth's verse novel, *The Golden Gate*, drew some approving but surprised reviews when it appeared in 1986, but it was not much noticed until 1993, when Seth won the W. H. Smith Literary Award for his prose novel, *A Suitable Boy*. So popular was this later book that many of his admiring readers, hungry for more, turned their attention to his earlier text with curiosity and interest. In their encounter with *The Golden Gate*, however, habitual novel readers got more than they bargained for. While finding the same vicarious "living beyond one's own life" experience that they sought in the realist novel, these readers must have become aware that *The Golden Gate* was appealing to them as well in a more sensuous way than any prose novel. In fact, the unfamiliar exercise of hearing and sight that this reading required was transforming them into that much rarer species, readers of poetry.

To become a reader of poetry via the more familiar, more popular novel genre was, in the late twentieth century, a fresh new experience. The novelty must have struck poetry aficionados as well as novel enthusiasts. In fact, the 1990s may have been the perfect time to introduce the English-language reading public to this hybrid genre; for poetry, its readership shrunk to the esoteric few, had all but exhausted the free-verse lyric tradition, now nearly a century old. Moreover, the novel, always restlessly seeking and absorbing the new—the *novel*—in voice, theme and technique, was in the process of a swing away from the shapeless absurdities of high Modernism towards more formal innovation and self-reflexive techniques.

In perusing *The Golden Gate*, a reader cannot pretend that the medium is prose or any spontaneously-generated discourse: the text is written in that most difficult of poetic forms, the English Onegin stanza. Thus, the reader must be conscious throughout her or his reading experience of the verse form governing and shaping all the discourse. But he or she is also aware of an experience that is utterly novelistic, for the narrative is contemporary and bourgeois, develops a substantial, singular though multi-threaded plot, represents a great many of the thoughts, feelings and viewpoints of its characters and depicts a familiar world with its mundane objects and events in redundant detail.

The pleasures of this kind of text are not a simple sum of poetic and novelistic gratifications. They amount to a truly hybrid experience which, though not actually new to the world in the late twentieth century, certainly felt new to those who first encountered it at that time. A trend was set. Various authors at once, or soon after, started composing verse novels, some in Onegin stanzas in direct imitation of *The Golden Gate*, some in other regular poetic forms, a great many in free verse, and others in innovative forms which might be adaptations of traditional stanzas, hybrids between "free" and "less-free" verse or mixtures of several quite different forms. This efflorescence still prevails in the second decade of the twenty-first century; it is evolving constantly and thus an account of its current developments must be somewhat tentative and provisional.

An account of the earlier developments of this genre, however, need not be as provisional. The verse novel, which seemed so new when *The Golden Gate* appeared, was actually quite old. It had not even undergone a real period of dormancy. A few other verse novels were published in the 1980s before Seth's text, their authors probably impelled by the same vague cultural dissatisfaction with the literary *status quo* that motivated Seth. One of these slightly earlier texts, John Fuller's *The Illusionists*, was also composed in Onegin stanzas.

But, of course, the verse novel is much older than the 1980s. Fuller and Seth both independently borrowed not only a stanza, but a whole genre from *Eugene Onegin*, an early nineteenth-century verse novel by the Russian Alexander Pushkin. And even Pushkin was not the inventor but an inheritor and renovator of the genre. Pushkin's main precursor, who was also the influential antecedent of many later verse novels, was the English Romantic poet Byron, whose *Don Juan*, published in parts between 1819 and 1823, was certainly the most important of the early texts in this tradition. However, the genre goes back even further than Byron. A seventeenth-century poetic narrative, William Chamberlayne's *Pharonnida*, may in fact represent the first attempt at a verse novel in English.

While the present English-language flowering of the genre may be the most prolific, the verse novel has enjoyed other periods of popularity and prestige during its considerable history. Examples are somewhat sparse until the early nineteenth century, but they have never died out in any period since then. The genre has also spread to different continents and countries, especially in recent times.

Though most verse novels are written in English, other cultures have produced examples at various stages since *Eugene Onegin* appeared serially in Russian between 1825 and 1832. Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, published in 1834, is in Polish; Nazim Hikmet's *Human*

Landscapes from my Country was written in the 1940s in Turkish; Harry Martinson's *Aniara* (1956) is in Swedish; Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1966) first appeared in Acholi, a language of Uganda; Amos Oz's *The Same Sea* (1999) is in Hebrew; Réjean Ducharme's *The Daughter of Christopher Columbus* (1969) and Mohammed Dib's *LA Trip* (2003) were both originally in French.

Moreover, even among English-language verse novels, the present vogue is strikingly international. Australia, for example, is a current leader in the genre, claiming as it does the works of important writers such as Dorothy Porter (*Akhenaten*; *The Monkey's Mask*; *Wild Surmise*), Alan Wearne (*The Nightmarkets*, *The Lovemakers*) and Les Murray (*The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, *Fredy Neptune*), as well as many other innovators and imitators in the form. But most Anglophone countries, including the U.K., the U.S.A., Jamaica and New Zealand, have also produced verse novels in the recent past, as have some non-Anglophone and semi-Anglophone countries such as Israel, Algieria, Uganda, Canada and South Africa.

Perhaps as a result of this cultural and geographical diversity, the verse novel cannot authoritatively be attached to any specific theme or ideology, however broadly phrased. Observable tendencies in every age always seem to be undercut by exceptions. Dino Felluga notes a "subversive" disposition in the Victorian verse novel, but has to include in the genre Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, which is anything but subversive (2002, 174, 184). In fact, if Virginia Woolf is to be believed, this text set a conservative standard for domesticated women that lasted for generations (Woolf 1942, 150-51).

Of course, however anarchic the material, an account of the genealogy of verse novels must attempt to classify and make sense of its subject-matter. This book does track recurrent themes and continuing traditions, but they are many and, much of the time, unsystematically variable.

Almost from the beginning, for example, a thread of feminist or, at least, woman-oriented verse novels can be traced. The texts in this line, mostly but not all authored by women, sympathetically anatomise the situation of specific women characters in social settings of their times, often focusing in radical ways on female sexuality in the process. Even Anna Seward's *Louisa*, published as early as 1784, can be roughly included in this tradition, which is dominated by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* of 1856. Barrett Browning's text was followed in the nineteenth century by "Violet Fane"'s *Denzil Place* and Wilfred Scawen Blunt's *Griselda* and in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by "Susan Miles"'s *Lettice Delmer*, Eileen Hewitt's *Donna Juana*, Dorothy

Porter's *The Monkey's Mask*, Diane Brown's *8 Stages of Grace*, Bernadine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, Anne Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband*, Ana Castillo's *Watercolor Women Opaque Men* and Pam Bernard's *Esther*, to name but a few.

However, a contrary tradition exists; *The Angel in the House* has offspring, too. A strand of conservative, male-authored verse novels runs through every period since the genre's inception. Even before Patmore and his Victorian idealisation of domesticated femininity, Thomas Moore, so bravely radical in his political thought, in 1835 parodies the young woman who dares to style herself a poet in *The Fudges in England*. His parody is decidedly more cruel than Christopher Anstey's teasing of a similarly aspiring female character in *A New Bath Guide* seventy years earlier. Astonishingly, this tradition continues into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, appearing in Christopher La Farge's *Each to the Other*, C. J. Dennis's *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*, McKinlay Kantor's *Glory for Me*, Peter Bowman's *Beach Red*, Les Murray's *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* and even, to some extent, Brad Leithauser's *Darlington's Fall*.

Some of these later male-oriented texts belong to another, more period-specific verse novel tradition or, rather, preoccupation. The great events of the first half of the twentieth century were the World Wars; many verse novels of this period are deeply imprinted with the trauma of war. Unsurprisingly, those that focus directly on the wartime experience of their characters are all authored by men. Even as late as the twentieth century, war has mostly excluded women from the strong bonds formed between comrades under the pressures of battle, and this is reflected in several of these books. *Glory for Me* and, particularly, *Beach Red*, both of which recount Second World War experiences, belittle women and background them, seeing them merely as attendants and comforters of men. David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, a First World War story, does not explicitly disparage women, but it omits them almost completely from its narrative. In contrast, Edgar Lee Masters's *Domesday Book* focuses on a female character who experiences the First World War close up as a nurse in France; nevertheless, even her role as participant is eclipsed by male characters who fight as soldiers on the Front.

Gender roles in some recently published verse novels are, at last, evolving. Non-heterosexual gender relationships are foregrounded in Marilyn Hacker's *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*, Porter's *The Monkey's Mask* and *Wild Surmise*, Seth's *The Golden Gate*, Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, Chris Jones's *The Times of Zenia Gold*, Castillo's *Watercolor Women Opaque Men* and Wayne Koestenbaum's *Model Homes*. In many others, such as Fuller's *The Illusionists*, Alan Wearne's

The Lovemakers and Porter's *Akhenaten*, such non-traditional relationships are casually evident, even if they are not in the foreground.

Other content-related aspects such as narrative type and thematic subgenre are also very varied. They include (but are not exhausted by): Don Juan stories, some of which actually feature female protagonists (Byron's *Don Juan*, Blunt's *Griselda*, Hewitt's *Donna Juana*, Gilbert Frankau's *One of Us*, Masters's *Domesday Book*); epistolary narratives (Christopher Anstey's *The New Bath Guide*, Anna Seward's *Louisa*, Moore's *Fudge Family* sagas, Arthur Hugh Clough's *Amours de Voyage*, Patmore's *The Victories of Love*, John Haynes's *Letter to Patience*, James Baker Hall's *Praeder's Letter*s); fictional autobiographies (Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, May Sinclair's *The Dark Night*, Philip Toynbee's *Pantaloon*, Dennis's *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*, La Farge's *Each to the Other*, Castillo's *Watercolor Women Opaque Men*, Mary Rakow's *The Memory Room*); stories based on classical myth (Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*; Dorothy Porter's *Akhenaten*); popular literature ("Owen Meredith"'s *Lucile*, Alphonso Alva Hopkins's *Geraldine*, Manners Stephenson's *Jason of the Golden Fleece*, Zelda Varian Price's *Take It to the Hills*); community and family histories (William Allingham's *Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland*, David Budbill's *Judevine*, Anthony Burgess's *Byrne*, Jana Harris's *The Dust of Everyday Life*, Siddharth Katragadda's *Dark Rooms*, Paul Hetherington's *Blood and Old Belief*, Craig Raine's *History: The Home Movie*; Brad Leithauser's *Darlington's Fall*); science fiction (Harry Martinson's *Aniara*, Frederick Turner's *The New World*, John Barnie's *Ice*, Frederick Pollack's *Happiness*); mysteries (Porter's *The Monkey's Mask*; H. R. F. Keating's *Jack the Lady-Killer,* Martha Grimes's *Send Bygraves*); love stories (Seward's *Louisa*, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Hacker's *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*, Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband*); documentaries (Jordie Albiston's *The Hanging of Jean Lee*, Alistair Te Ariki Campbell's *Maori Battalion*); political comment or protest (Douglas Burnet Smith's *The Killed*; Michael Cawood Green's *Sinking*); epic-scale stories of nationhood or oppression (Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body*, Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, W. S. Merwin's *The Folding Cliffs*); and coming-of-age tales, most of them aimed at an adolescent readership (Evaristo's *Lara*; Virginia Euwer Wolff's *Make Lemonade*, Juan Felipe Herrera's *Crashboomlove*, Steven Herrick's *Love, Ghosts and Nose Hair*).

Although in the past particular styles of verse have been associated with—and even entailed by—certain content and genres, the verse novel has never been tied to a specific poetic form. From the beginning, different

texts have diverged widely from one another in line-lengths and verse forms. In the Victorian period and earlier, variants on all three important metrical lines, pentameter, tetrameter and hexameter, are evident, as well as many different types of stanza and rhyme, or its absence. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the majority of verse novels, for example Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* and Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, are composed in the favoured style of the period, free verse; but many others are written in traditional, adapted or newly-invented verse forms that follow rules of regularity and repetition to varying degrees of strictness. Seth's *The Golden Gate* takes prosodic difficulty and regularity to an extreme in his rigorously correct Onegin stanzas; others adhere to the same stanza's rules more temperately. Burgess's *Byrne* is composed mainly in Byronic *ottava rima*, but it includes as well some sonnets and a section in Spenserian stanzas. *Losing It*, by Ranjit Bolt, is in tetrameter couplets. Interestingly, a third group of contemporary verse novels exists in a unique space situated between the two extremes of freedom and constraint. In these texts, a verse form may seem to be present and yet only rarely appear completely or perfectly. An example is Walcott's *Omeros*, which constantly approaches but seldom fully realises Dante's *terza rima*. Another is Fred D'Aguiar's *Bloodlines*, which is composed in *ottava rima* and yet the stanza form is continually backgrounded by imperfect rhyme, colloquial rhythms, midline pauses and forceful enjambment. Finally, there is *Darlington's Fall* by Brad Leithauser, whose form is unique. It is composed of stanzas of ten lines, each line fairly free as to rhythm, but every one of them rhyming with at least one other line in the stanza. What is unusual about this arrangement is that there is no repeating pattern of rhymes at all, and some of the rhymes are so far apart as to be all but imperceptible. This verse novel shares with *Omeros*, *Bloodlines* and some of the sonnets in *Love Death and the Changing of the Seasons* the sense of being haunted by a form, though the effect is achieved in each case by different means.

Because of the verse novel's compound nomenclature, the question that arises about it is, first and foremost, one of genre: under what conditions may a text be considered as both a novel and a poem? This book starts out, in Chapter 1, as an attempt to answer that question. Although generic hybridity is probably more the rule than the exception in literary works, an unusually determined rhetoric has for centuries succeeded in keeping the two genres of novel and verse apart. In my first chapter I anatomise this rhetoric as some influential theorists have propounded it, and find it deficient in both logic and evidence. Even the more basic distinction between prose and verse *per se* is open to debate,

not only in the twentieth-century context of "prose-poems" and free verse, but also in earlier contexts in which some novelistic prose was marked by metrical regularity. And, of course, once this distinction is called into question, narrative poetry and prose fiction can be dissected on the same block and differences between the novel and other types of fictional narrative—regardless of verse or prose—combed out. In the process of its dissections of genre, this first chapter deals not only with narrative discourse but also with various poetic genres as they relate to the verse of verse novels. The discussion touches only lightly on epic, whose connections and disconnections with the novel have already been exhaustively debated by novel theorists. Lyric is included in the discussion because many verse novels contain passages that some commentators describe as lyrical; but this is true of many prose novels as well. Much more important is romance, since it is a genre very closely related to, and clearly intersecting with, the novel. Moreover, romances have, at least since Thomas Mallory, been composed in either prose or verse. Only a small proportion of verse novels can, by any stretch of the imagination, be described as romances, however; they are mostly too realistic.

The rest of this book, Chapters 2 to 5, pursues the same question in the process of investigating a multiplicity of individual works. To be classified as a verse novel, a text must be both verse and novel. While verse is mostly easy to recognise by its lineation, the novel in its broadest definition is very difficult to pin down, being extremely versatile and ever-changing. I have consequently chosen to ignore many of the protean developments of the modern novel for the sake of this study, by and large limiting my definition to that of the realist novel as described by Ian Watt in *Aspects of the Novel*. However, my concept of the novel is influenced as well by Mikhail Bakhtin's model in *The Dialogic Imagination*. A rough summary of the novelistic features sought in each text includes substantial length, contemporaneity, verisimilitude, dialogism, characters possessing at least a modicum of interiority, a reasonably unified plot and a fictional world containing a redundancy of mundane objects.

But it is not only the novelistic elements of these texts that I investigate. Each analysis is informed by a second critical question as well: to what extent and in what ways does the versification shape or influence narration? In close readings of verse novels from all periods, the organisation, rhythm and line-endings in freer verse, and metre, rhyme and stanzaic batching in more regular verse, are mapped, often in some detail, not only onto grammatical features such as phrasing, diction and sentence structure, but also onto semantic, narrative features such as voice and reference. The metrical analyses may be regarded as somewhat naïve

because they mainly employ old-fashioned foot-based terminology, but I chose this terminology as being more widely communicative than recent systems based on linguistics. Shifts between the old terminology and Derek Attridge's theory of "beats" outlined in his seminal 1982 work, *The Rhythms of English Poetry*, are made with gay abandon at times. My aim throughout this book is to reach for the tools that best suit the task in hand rather than to adhere relentlessly to a strict theoretical consistency.

One of my basic assumptions, labelling me a "Cratylist" in Donald Wesling's terminology (1996, 66), is that form has meaning, or—to put it less radically, following the lines of Susan Wolfson's and Reuven Tsur's moderate aestheticism—form is always implicated in the semantics of a literary text (Wolfson 1997, 3: Tsur 1996, 85; Tsur 1985, 444). Of course, this assumption is useful to varying degrees in the analysis of different texts. Certain verse novelists seem to use the resources of their chosen verse forms more fully than others. Some manage their forms with conventional decorum; others achieve transformations in which the verse under their hands becomes capable of effects unforeseeable in either a formalist study of its structure or a historical review of its customary functions; and still others frame their discourse to override their chosen poetic form so completely that narration and versification appear quite independent of each other. However, even in this latter case, the presence of a verse form creates a perceptible accompaniment to the narrative discourse which makes the experience of reading the story different from that of a story in prose.

The detailed poetic and narratological analyses that occupy most of the pages of this book are justifiable in terms of the hybridity of the genre under observation. In a verse novel the narration is apprehended only through, or by means of, the verse, and vice-versa. In characterising a specific text as a verse novel, both features need to be anatomised, especially at their intersection.

Despite this formalist preoccupation, the overall structure of Chapters 2 to 5 is historical. Chapter 2 begins the historical process by tracing the verse novel's early origins. So far as I can determine, the first text that actually labelled itself a "*Poetical Novel*" was Anna Seward's epistolary *Louisa*, published in 1784. But some critics and commentators fancifully suggest that the genre had its birth even earlier than this, in the Italian Renaissance romances, for example, or even in the *Odyssey*. Anstey's *The New Bath Guide*, published in 1766, is certainly an earlier example; but it is beaten by over a century if Chamberlayne's 1659 *Pharonnida* be accepted as the first English verse novel, which is how some influential critics have regarded it. Early nineteenth-century verse novels include

Byron's *Don Juan*, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Adam Mickiewicz's Polish-language *Pan Tadeusz*. Pushkin subtitled his text "*A Novel in Verse*"; if this is an accurate taxonomy, then Byron's and Mickiewicz's poems should be similarly classified, for Byron was Pushkin's model and Mickiewicz his admirer and emulator.

The third chapter, which continues this history, focuses on the Victorian era. The verse novel remained an idiosyncratic rarity until this first major outburst of production in the later nineteenth century. The time of proliferation occupied a longer period than the mere two decades between 1850 and 1869 accorded it by Felluga (2002, 171-72): Chapter 3 discusses texts published as far apart as 1848 and 1895. This flourishing phase produced such major works as Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Clough's *The Bothie of Toper-na-fuosich* and *Amours de Voyage*, George Meredith's *Modern Love* and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*. It also included some less famous works (less famous, at least, in our own time), among them "Owen Meredith"'s *Lucile*, "Violet Fane"'s *Denzil Place* and Blunt's *Griselda*. The verse forms employed in Victorian verse novels are almost as varied as those of the contemporary period, and the effects of the different verse forms on narration are complex and wide-ranging. This long third chapter is arranged according to the types of verse used. Starting with blank-verse examples, such as *Aurora Leigh*, *Denzil Place* and *The Ring and the Book*, it proceeds to other pentameter-based texts, including *Griselda*, *Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland* and *Modern Love*. It then moves on to the non-pentameter verse novels of this prosodically experimental age, starting with Clough's hexameter narratives and continuing through several tetrameter variations. The most stylised of the tetrameter verse novels, "Meredith"'s *Lucile* and Hopkins's *Geraldine*, are in anapaestic couplets. Less stylised are the irregularly-rhymed iambic examples, such as Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* and Herman Melville's *Clarel*. Not all of the texts discussed in the chapter are British; by this period Americans such as Melville and Hopkins were also writing verse novels.

Chapter 4 deals with the earlier twentieth century. Some of the texts considered here are, as a reader might expect, decidedly Modernist in poetic and narrative style. Free verse is of course a badge of Modernism on a poetic text, and several of the verse novels of this period are composed in it. However, the text that I have singled out in this chapter as displaying most Modernist stylistic features, such as disjunction and indeterminacy, is not written entirely in free verse. This text is Jones's *In Parenthesis*, which includes short rhyming jingles and prose passages of various types as well as free verse. By comparing *In Parenthesis* with

other works of high Modernism, I argue that many texts belonging to this movement are hybrid at such a fundamental level that they make the disintegration of prose into verse and verse into prose an actual reading experience. Leaving aside the question of how many texts that seem to be written in prose in this period could in fact be considered as verse novels, I go on to show that the effects of lineated free verse on narrative are as variable as the types of formal "freedom" essayed in different versions of free verse. I discuss Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, Sinclair's *The Dark Night* and Bowman's *Beach Red* as free-verse novels of the time, even though Masters's text, lacking a master-narrative, is slightly peripheral to the verse novel genre and Bowman's verse is not strictly "free."

The discussion then turns to the more numerous verse novels written in regular forms. Starting with the jazz rhythms of Joseph Moncure March's two verse novellas, *The Wild Party* and *The Set-Up*, it continues through the blank verse of "Miles"'s *Lettice Delmer* and Masters's *Domesday Book* to the numerous texts that use mixtures of different verse forms. These include the first Australian text to be mentioned, Dennis's *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*, as well as those of the American brothers Stephen Vincent Benét and William Rose Benét, who produced *John Brown's Body* and *Rip Tide* respectively. Finally to be considered are works appearing in consistent stanza forms: Frankau's three *ottava rima* verse novels, *One of Us*, *One of Them* and *More of Us*, and Hewitt's *Donna Juana*.

The fifth chapter is devoted to the contemporary verse novel, starting in the 1980s. It examines the genre's dramatic rebirth in the 1990s and attempts to chart the many paths of development since then, offering a rough geography and taxonomy so far. Because of the large numbers of verse novels that have been and are continually being produced during this period, Chapter 5 provides detailed discussions of only a small proportion of the existent texts. As to the others, it omits or merely mentions many of them, deals with some several at a time, and provides very brief comments on a few. As in Chapters 3 and 4, the discussion proceeds from looser to more constrained forms. Consequently, it begins with free-verse novels, which enjoy a vast majority in this period, and divides them roughly into shorter-line and longer-line examples. In free verse narratives, line endings and white space become important factors in the reader's reception of a story. Shorter-line free verse often has the effect of terseness, a kind of withholding of full discursiveness. Porter uses this withholding capacity very effectively in *The Monkey's Mask*, which, being the narrative of a murder mystery, needs to unfold gradually, the withheld pieces of the story hinted at but not disclosed until the *denouement*. Other authors, such

as Carson in *The Beauty of the Husband*, use shorter lines among longer lines to contract and crystallise specific moments of fictional time. Longer-line free verse can be the vehicle of a high style, as in Turner's *The New World*, but it can give rise to other effects as well. Especially when it is sparing or completely lacking in punctuation, it can impart an overwhelming sense of being caught up in a world and its time, of being poured onward through varying scenes and impressions by a relentless current of words. It also often gives a reader the impression of an encyclopaedic exhaustiveness: everything that can be included is present in the text. Such are the experiences of reading Murray's *Fredy Neptune* and Merwin's *The Folding Cliffs*, both narrated in long lines.

The later parts of Chapter 5 are devoted to contemporary verse novels that use regular—or, in some cases, semi-regular—verse forms, starting with unrhymed verse, such as the trimeter, tetrameter and pentameter of Hetherington's *Blood and Old Belief* and the blank verse and occasional unrhymed hexameters of David Mason's *Ludlow*. Next come the much more numerous rhymed forms, such as the *ottava rima* of Burgess's *Byrne* and D'Aguiar's *Bloodlines*, the *terza rima* of, among other texts, Walcott's *Omeros* and Glyn Maxwell's *Time's Fool*, and the sonnets of Hacker's *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* and Murray's *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*. Verse novels based on a four-beat line follow, a surprising number of which are composed in Onegin stanzas. In addition to Fuller's and Seth's texts are several others, including those of Keating, Matt Rubinstein, Andy Croft and Aiden Andrew Dun. At the end of the chapter are appended Wearne's mixed-form verse novels as well as Leithauser's *Darlington's Fall* with its unique ten-line stanza.

Strikingly, among contemporary authors who delight in the onward momentum and rhythmic returns of stanza form, some, such as Walcott, D'Aguiar and Wearne, seem to find that frequent and regular rhymes make their discourse sound too contrived or archaic to allow the illusion of spontaneity. Thus, as the later parts of Chapter 5 show, these verse novelists contrive elaborate strategies to avoid, defuse and background the rhymes, and often the metres as well, of the stanzas that they utilise. The authors can, of course, bring out the stanza's memorialising force at any time by suddenly producing a perfect specimen, foregrounded by end-stopped lines, which most of them do at moments of emotional importance. Nevertheless, the stanza remains more a haunting than a presence to the reader of some of these contemporary texts.

CHAPTER ONE

GENRE

The phrases "verse novel" and "novel in verse" would seem to some theorists a contradiction in terms. Thus, the very existence of a genre called "verse novel" may be challenged. Narrative poetry is one of the oldest genres in the world and nearly all texts subtitled or known as "novels in verse" fit comfortably into it. Many theorists agree that one of the distinctive features of the novel, a comparatively recent genre, is that it is written in prose (Frye 1957, 304-05; Forster 1927, 13; Bakhtin 1981, 9, 24-25; Ortega 1961, 136; Watt 1957, 28). Why then should we bother with a hybrid taxonomy for this kind of text, when an elemental and comprehensive one already exists?

One answer to this question may seem crudely materialistic. As Dino Felluga points out, from the early nineteenth century the readership of novels proceeded to outstrip the readership of poetry (2002, 171). Since both terms "verse novel" and "novel in verse" place the word "novel" in the substantive position, with "verse" reduced to adjectival modification, a "verse novel" must surely be, essentially, a "novel." A publisher, in labelling a poetic text in this way, may attempt to increase its sales by appropriating for it the much larger market normally enjoyed by novels. This ploy has been used since Victorian times, when poetry was in fact more popular than it has subsequently become.

Capturing a readership, however, may be more than a mere marketing ploy. A genre must be at least partially defined by its target audience, the receiver that inherently structures so much of a text, including voice, style, themes and context. If a long poem be properly designed by its author, not just the blurb-writer featured on the back cover, for readers of the novel—or of some specific subgenre of the novel—then the poem may surely claim a generic relationship with the type of text that these readers normally favour.

And, in fact, for the ordinary reader of more than one literary period, many texts formally subtitled "*A Verse Novel*" or "*A Novel in Verse*" may seem to resemble novels more than contemporary poems. Of course, these resemblances are not the same in different periods, since both poems and

novels have undergone various changes since the establishment of the novel as a genre in English.

In the eighteenth and, especially, the nineteenth century, texts calling themselves, or regarded as, verse novels tend to eschew the high style of much of the poetry of their times, telling long stories that are usually set in the present rather than in a historical or mythical past. Also unlike those of the poetic genres, their favoured topics include women's lives, marriage and the domestic sphere. Their stories are realistic in the sense that characters, settings and events are not obviously allegorical, but seem to exist in and for themselves. Although plots often include some romance features such as coincidences and improbably happy endings, both events and objects appear to follow the cause-and-effect laws of physics pertaining in the readers' own material world. Characters generally show a familiar exterior, looking and acting as people might in an objectively "real" world, but they also disclose interior lives that plausibly resemble the inner thoughts and sensations that readers would recognise from their own experiences of subjectivity. This coexistence of outer and inner realities is not usually a contradiction or presented as a clash between an idealist and a materialist world view; the objective outer world is a paramount reality to which the subject must adjust (Lukács 1962, 18-19). Even if the reader becomes aware of an external reality only via subjective accounts of it, ironies and multiple viewpoints provide him or her with sufficient loopholes through which to apprehend a truth beyond the reach of subjectivities.

Nearly all of the stories told in these texts are contemporaneous with the author's own *milieu*. Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* is unusual in that it is set two centuries before the time of its writing. However, the world that it depicts is represented in terms of myriads of intimate details, both material and psychological, which radically reduce its unfamiliarity. Browning's low style, too, tends to domesticate novelistically rather than glamorise poetically his story and its characters. The real exception among the nineteenth-century texts that may be regarded as verse novels is Herman Melville's *Clarel* which, though contemporaneous, almost completely excludes domesticity, has very few female characters, is clearly allegorical in some respects and deals at length with religious and metaphysical concepts rather than getting on with its story. Nevertheless, this exceptionality is not unrelated to that of Melville's prose text, *Moby Dick*, which is normally considered a novel.

In the earlier twentieth century, contemporaneity is still the norm. In terms of plot, most of the works of this period aspire to an even greater realism—or, at least, verisimilitude—than those of earlier periods, because

most of them avoid unlikely plots and happy endings. Although some display a general Modernist flouting of rules and taboos, in treatment and choice of subject-matter as well as style, even these are mostly not much less realist than those of the previous period. Georg Lukács accuses Modernist fiction writers of being anti-realist, mainly because the "stream-of-consciousness" type of narration offers no objective underpinning for a reality existing outside the consciousness of a single character (1962, 25, 17-21). However, not many verse novels of this period display "stream-of-consciousness" narration in any more emphatic isolation than the novels of earlier periods. A "stream-of-consciousness" narration occurring in a poetic narrative can in any case be traced to the poetic tradition of the dramatic monologue, which has often taken the form of private, interior discourse. In a dramatic monologue, a character demonstrates not only a personal, idiosyncratic version of events but also his or her embeddedness in a matrix of other people, whose points of view can often be inferred even when not directly represented. Moreover, most verse novels that use this narrative technique or the similar epistolary technique, present monologues or letters generated by more than one character; thus allowing the reader to piece together a reasonably objective account of people and events, independent of any single character's consciousness. As to subject-matter, the verse novels of this period resemble many prose novels of their age, which was an age of World Wars. The fixation on war to be found in some texts is tempered in others by a traditionally novelistic regard for women's issues and marriage. In studying this Modernist period it is difficult to decide in some cases, for example Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* and May Sinclair's *The Dark Night*, whether a text is more novelistic or poetic, but similar generic confusion can be found in other texts normally classified as prose novels, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*.

In our own period, which I take to begin in the late twentieth century, the connections between texts designated as verse novels and popular prose novels are particularly striking. This is mainly because the contemporary outburst of verse novels was fuelled by a reaction to both high art and the type of poetry that, in the early 1980s, still persisted, largely unchanged since the early twentieth century. Almost always composed in free verse and hardly ever narrative, this type of poetry tended towards the short, epiphanic or confessional lyric. The reading of poetry had by now grown to be a somewhat esoteric and academic pastime, many poems requiring special skills to interpret them. Even long poems consisted mostly of non-narrative lyric moments in series rather than temporally structured narratives (Allen 1999, 200; Feirstein 1999,

209; Sauerberg 2004, 444-46). Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Hart Crane's *The Bridge* are good examples of this kind of sequence. But in the 1980s and, especially, the 1990s a rebellion against this type of poetry began to gain momentum, manifesting itself in shifts towards formal versification and narrative discourse. Collections of essays by poets and critics on "expansive poetry" and "new formalism" decried the confessionalism, elitism and lyric restrictions of mainstream twentieth-century poetry (see, for example, Gwynn 1999 and Finch 1999). According to Dana Gioia in one of these collections, the changes signalled a rejection of the "coterie culture of the universities," which used to provide the main readership for poetry, towards a wider, educated but less specifically academic audience. The "idealised common reader" of whom Gioia writes is of course the same reader courted by many novelists and, whether or not this figure really does favour—and purchase—the new narrative verse, its authors' attempts to attract such a reader are very often demonstrated in the popular nature of their subject-matter and style (Gioia 1999, 34-36).

The popular is, of course, a difficult concept to define and quite variable as to content (Johnson 2005, 3-6); though one certainty is that it is not a concept commonly associated with poetry, especially poetry published after the nineteenth century. The term can refer merely to what is favoured by the many; in this sense it can be measured by counting readers or purchasers of a book. Although many works that are popular in this sense are ephemeral, catching the fancy of a season and then sinking, and are often not very well executed or based on unsound or trivial views of the world, others such as the novels of Jane Austen are among the literary texts most admired by the educated elite.

However, in critical usage, the popular is normally the opposite of high art, which is what serious poets traditionally strive for. To Pierre Bourdieu, whose main generic interest is the novel, "commercial" or popular art is "directly subject to audience expectations," its creator influenced by "external powers, political or economic" (1995, 71, 61). Hans Robert Jauss calls the popular "'culinary' or entertainment art," and finds it in works precisely fulfilling the "expectations prescribed by a ruling standard of taste" (1982, 25). Ken Gelder, who focuses even more specifically than Bourdieu on the novel, seems to take a different view, claiming that "popular fiction is, essentially, genre fiction" (2004, 1). However, his position does not contradict Bourdieu or Jauss, for genre fiction, which is basically formulaic, exactly fulfils the expectations of an audience and is usually written with an eye to its readership and sales rather than some abstract or society-changing ideal.

By whatever terms popular literature is defined, one feature is commonly recognisable in it: an ease of absorption. The term "readability," often employed to encourage unpretentious readers and book clubs to purchase, usually refers to this feature. Popular texts are almost always "readable" in the sense that their surface meaning is inviting and simply accessible. Readability may entail an avoidance or softening of social or political issues, but need not do so. The literary genre to which this term is usually attached is that most adaptable of texts, the novel. Even the strictly followed formulae of genre fiction assist readability: they are preset structures that allow readers to understand aspects of plot and setting in advance.

Of course the situation is complicated by the fact that very little art or literature is uncontaminated by commercial or political motives or unswayed by the desires of an audience. Bourdieu himself, who claims on the one hand that the autonomous creators of "high" art achieve their identities only in opposition to more commercial, popular writers (1995, 70), also admits that these autonomous few may, perhaps unknowingly, find their art endangered by the same market forces that govern the others. Threats to autonomy may, he believes, "result from the increasingly greater interpenetration between the world of art and the world of money" and lead to a "blurring of the boundaries" "between the experimental work and the *bestseller*" (1995, 344-347). To Bourdieu, a "*bestseller*" is a "commercial" work of literature which is popular in the first sense of being favoured by the many; but it is also a commodity conforming to the rules of current genres and reproducing without question the official morality of the times. The fact that an autonomous, "experimental" and even "transgressive" work can be infiltrated in this way by its nemesis (Bourdieu 1995, 111) suggests a Derridean contamination of generic purity that is always-already there, at least to some extent, even in the "highest" literary works (Derrida 225).

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the novel genre as a whole has from the beginning had a reputation as a "low," popular art form, deficient in both aesthetic and moral standards (Robert 1980, 3-4; McKeon 1987, 27; Bakhtin 1981, 23). According to Ian Watt, when the English novel was establishing itself in the eighteenth century, the genre "was widely regarded as a typical example of the debased kind of writing by which booksellers pandered to the reading public." "Booksellers" or publishers had by this time largely replaced aristocratic patrons as "middlemen of the literary market-place," allowing potential sales rather than literary merit (or flattery of a patron) to influence publication; the "reading public" now included literate people of the lower classes and was

dominated in the upper and middle classes by women, whose lives were more leisured than their men's (Watt 1957, 35-59). Complaints by the patriarchal elite about the corrupting effects of novels on the lower classes and on women were matched by disparagement of the new genre itself—formed, as the elite believed, by the desires of this same corruptible readership.

In the novel genre, the distinction between the elite and the popular has thus always appeared blurry in cases other than the extremes. In fact, the high art novel, aimed at and consumed by only the initiated *avant-garde* is probably an invention of Modernism. A truly experimental novel such as Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* is unlikely to be purchased or read by any but the most die-hard intellectual, and is certainly not popular literature. A Victorian "penny dreadful," issued in cheap serial form and full of crowd-pleasing sensationalism but no serious reflection on the world or on art, is a popular novel. The great body of novels exist in the space between these extremes, with the tendency towards "readability" always pushing them in the direction of the popular.

This is in sharp contrast to the poetic genres, most of which, especially the epic, are essentially "high" literary forms. Popular ballads, disseminated orally and on cheap broadsheets for centuries, are probably more accurately regarded as song lyrics than poems *per se*; and they had become much less prevalent by the late nineteenth century. From the earliest days a liaison between a poem and a novel would almost always have involved a levelling of literary status between two unequal consorts.

Up to the early nineteenth century, while the novel itself was still suffering or recovering from the snobbish contempt of the intellectual elite, most verse novels were "popular" only in the sense that they represented the noble genre of poetry brought down by its association with what William MacNeile Dixon identified as a "servile," "domestic," "workaday" genre, the novel (1912, 235). But when, in the Victorian period, a divide started to appear between "high" and "popular" fiction, this was also registered to some extent in the verse novel. Owen Meredith's *Lucile*, Alphonso Alva Hopkins's *Geraldine* and, Manners Stephenson's *Jason of the Golden Fleece* display a number of popular features, both lurid and romantic; *Lucile* even became a bestseller, that great goal of the popular writer.

The verse novel, throughout its history in fact, has thus tracked the register and readership of the prose novel. Texts such as Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Lei*gh, Arthur Hugh Clough's *The Bothie* and Violet Fane's *Denzil Place* present "readable" stories of substantial length that include sufficient characters,

events, and objects to suggest a complete and complex living world. These fictional worlds invite middle- to highbrow (and sometimes even lowbrow) readers to participle in this "other" world vicariously by faithfully imitating the readers' own world in many material and circumstantial details. Interior particulars of characters and close descriptions of their personal lived time invite empathy and even identification with these characters. The sense of being absorbed by another world and other lives that is the experience of reading a nineteenth-century prose novel is probably the most important aspect of reading one of these verse novels too. The fact that they are composed in verse would add a slightly unfamiliar dimension to the experience, which might put off a few readers but probably not many. The novelistic prose of the time was often "poetic" in ways that will be discussed later and, in any case, many novel readers were also habitual readers of poetry.

With a few exceptions, most of the earlier twentieth-century verse novels appeal to readers in similar ways to the Victorian texts. David Jones's *In Parenthesis* and Philip Toynbee's *Pantaloon* display some Modernist and Postmodernist indeterminacy of meaning, and Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* and May Sinclair's *The Dark Night* are written in rather reticent styles, but the majority, including MacKinlay Kantor's *Glory for Me*, Susan Miles's *Lettice Delmer*, Eileen Hewitt's *Donna Juana* and Gilbert Frankau's *One of Us* are as readable and sympathetic as the nineteenth-century texts.

In our own period, a great many verse novels, including Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*, Diane Brown's *8 Stages of Grace* and Virginia Euwer Wolff's *Make Lemonade*, are popular and novelistic in the sense that they evoke the everyday life of ordinary people in the kind of detail that allows a reader to relate to them without effort. Others, such as Ranjit Bolt's *Losing It* and Bernadine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, are more lurid and fantastic, resembling the sensationalist type of popular novel. Some, like Marilyn Hacker's *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* and Chris Jones's *The Times of Zenia Gold*, are sexually explicit, as are many popular prose novels in this uninhibited age. Even genre fiction is represented: Frederick Turner's *The New World*, Frederick Pollack's *Happiness* and John Barnie's *Ice* are examples of science fiction; H. R. F. Keating's *Jack the Lady Killer* is a detective story; Virginia Euwer Wolff's *Make Lemonade* and Steven Herrick's *Love, Ghosts and Nose Hair* belong to the rapidly growing subgenre of young adult fiction.

Like many of the earlier texts regarded as verse novels, nearly all contemporary examples appear to strive for readability. This feature distinguishes them significantly from the "high" literary art of our times.

Most self-conscious Modernist and Postmodernist poems and novels are not easily readable, in book-club parlance; in fact, they are often extremely cryptic. Although written in verse, which Lars Ole Sauerberg finds a potential difficulty for a contemporary reader (2004, 442), the great majority of recent verse novels are very easily accessible and simple to interpret. H. R. F. Keating finds their kind of verse "far from being an obstacle to easy reading" but, instead, "a positive inducement to keep turning pages" (1). The language of these texts is generally uncomplicated as to diction and sentence structure; sometimes, as in *The Emperor's Babe*, it is decidedly colloquial. Hermetic symbolism and unstable ironies are rare; even the high style when it occasionally appears, as it does in Frederick Turner's *The New World*, is devoid of abstruse words or syntactic inversions. Clearly, at least some of these narratives do succeed in hitting their target audience. For example, Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask*, with its lesbian-detective heroine, has been successful with the general public and has even been made into a popular film in Australia. The verse novel is thus not just a poetic narrative proclaimed to be novel-like by its publisher—or its subtitle. It is a novelistic genre in terms of its basic orientation to the world and its readership.

However, no matter how much a verse novel may resemble a prose novel in the broad and somewhat abstract features of plot, character, setting and even narration, it retains a very clear visual and usually also auditory reminder of its difference. What speakers of English regard as verse is marked as such by lineation, a typographical feature that can be perceived even by the illiterate and partially-sighted. Moreover, in the sequential intoning of its words, whether this occurs out loud or merely in the "mind's ear" of a reader, rhythmical patterns beat out metres or other less regular cadences that either dominate or run counter to the more "natural" rhythms of prose emphasis; and rhyme, a type of aural repetition avoided in prose, makes musical echoes across phrases that are often impossible to ignore. Contrary to the hopes of publishers and the implications of grammar, a verse novel is first and foremost a poem. Its "verse" component may appear merely in the adjectival position, but verse is apprehended by the senses and therefore appears as primary.

Given this irreducible poetic fact, we should return to the proposition that a so-called verse novel is a long narrative poem. Poems predate novels by millennia and have probably always been with us. But even with these two classifying modifiers, "long" and "narrative," the precise subclass of the poetry genre to which novel-like poems belong is insufficiently defined. Both epic and romance are substantial types of narrative poem, but neither subgenre seems to accommodate novelistic poetry.

The epic is the most celebrated of long poems, but it is an ancient subgenre and, in its pure form, it has probably died out (Sauerberg 2004, 440-441), if not with the end of heroism at least with the waning of heroic Romanticism. Simon Dentith, who identifies epic principally with high style and heroic character, claims that, despite modernity's fascinated experimentation with modes of "epic primitivism," pure epic has become "archaic" and that, in fact, "contemporary civility is produced out of a repudiation of the heroism celebrated in epic" (2006, 1-15). According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the growth of the novel is closely implicated in the demise of the epic, which comes down to us as "completely finished, a congealed and half-moribund genre." In Bakhtin's scheme, epic uses a language that is authoritative and monologic and a content that is walled off from the present in an "absolute past," whereas the novel is full of those familiarising and ironic voices which make up "polyglossia" (later "heteroglossia"), and its action and relevance belong to the "flowing and transitory" contemporary "'low,' present" (14-21, 301). Some of the texts to be considered, or merely mentioned, in this book make claims for epic status, for example, Byron's *Don Juan*, Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, Clough's *The Bothie*, Thomas Woolner's *Pygmalion*, Frankau's *One of Us*, Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body*, Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, Jana Harris's *The Dust of Everyday Life*, Turner's *The New World* and W. S. Merwin's *The Folding Cliffs*; however, all of these are too dialogic to be considered epic by Bakhtin's standards. Several of them are actually, as is Henry Fielding's formative prose novel *Tom Jones*, comic or mock epics, making them decidedly novelistic.

Unlike epic, romance is still a viable genre, and one which might seem an appropriate classification for long poems that display novelistic features. Historically, romance may be seen as taking over where epic began to fail. When the Classical, Arthurian or Carolingian tales started losing their macho high seriousness and drifting into eroticism, irony and multiplicity of narrative thread, they metamorphosed into romance (Waller 1926, 3). Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseide*, Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* are examples of this kind of romance. Nineteenth-century examples include John Keats's *Endymion* and Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Of course, romance may use a variety of types of material, but it always tends towards the fantastic or exotic and its favoured plot includes both quest adventure and "romantic" love.

What is striking about romance is that, although it originated as a poetic genre, it also extends itself outside verse territory. A romance may be written either in verse or in prose, and this has been the case for a very