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Introduction: Style, Composition, Creative Practice

The idea for this book came from an observation: that some 'traditional' approaches to creative writing in the academy still seemed to hang on the two thousand-year old advice of Plato in *The Republic*:

> The poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind.
>
> (Leitch 2001: 35)

In other words, the writer all but abandons the critical faculty with which he or she has been inculcated elsewhere when studying texts and devotes all energy to self-expression. The assumption often (but not always) appears to be that beginning writers (or any writer at all) will write well if pushed in at the deep end and asked to produce full stories and poems, or to 'just write'. While, self-evidently, this may well produce good results in some cases, I wondered whether there was not something to be drawn from more critical, theoretical approaches to the discipline – especially, as so often, when it is being practised in an academic context.

An analogy could be drawn with learning to paint: would your first experience of an art class be to sit down and paint a still life in oils? Continuing this analogy: is there not an argument for complementary approaches to creative writing that view the subject in a similar way; that is, that a writer has available to him or her a set of tools and techniques, in the same way that an artist has a range of colours on his or her palette and a spread of different-sized brushes in the china pot next to the easel? Where we might learn to lighten a deep red by adding a drop of white paint, so a writer might benefit from learning how a particular mood in a piece of writing can be 'foregrounded' by careful selection of particular lexical fields, or by repetition, or parallelism. Just as a painter learns to use shading to create the illusion of depth, so

can a writer learn to use fracturing syntax, creative punctuation and linguistic deviation to convey the illusion of being inside the mind of a character.

Of course, approaching the art of creative writing from the perspective of 'craft' is not a new idea. In dialogue with Plato, Aristotle's *Poetics* constitutes the first rigorous categorisation of the form of verbal art. *Poetics* is a scientific anatomisation, in opposition to Plato's obsession with 'inspiration',[1] just as can be found in Aristotle's work on classifications of the natural world, and as such anticipates the ambition of stylistics to provide rigorous accounts of the form of literary discourse. During the Renaissance, it was treated as a rulebook or manual for literary composition, and can be seen as the first work of true literary criticism, putting down the roots which grew into Neoclassicism, Russian Formalism and the New Criticism. Note, then, that at the dawn of the discipline we find an interest in the processes of *composition*, not textual analysis. *Poetics* is a technical manual. In their exploration of the twin concepts of **mimesis** and **diegesis**, the work of classical poetics sets out one of the key dichotomies to be discussed in this book.

So, the idea of approaching creative writing from the perspective of technique is not new; approaching it from the perspective of a discipline rooted in linguistics, I believe, is. The discipline I am referring to is that of (literary) stylistics,[2] and if this book has a manifesto, it is this: that stylistics has an enormous amount to offer the practising writer by virtue of its widening of his or her understanding of the 'expressive mechanics' of language. There is an intense debate around whether creative writing should be taught in an academic context creatively, and by practitioners, or technically, with emphasis on craft and critical theory. I do not wish this book in any way to suggest that a firm choice has to be made in one direction or the other; in fact, I think we can have our cake and eat it. There are many different ways to approach the subject, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. I view this contribution to the discipline as an augmentation rather than a replacement of any existing methodologies – as a new, complementary perspective. I would add, further, that intense and rigorous awareness of the stuff of language can in and of itself lead to creativity (or, if you prefer, inspiration). Creativity can arise from within language, and not only from sources external to it; in other words, inspiration often comes from and within the act of writing itself. As Carter and Nash (1990: 176–7) make clear, a great deal can be learned about the relationships between language and creativity through writing games, wherein language itself provides the creative stimulus which might normally be expected to

come from an extra-linguistic source (William Empson, in work which anticipates the growth of stylistics, also defined this incarnation of creativity as one of his seven types of ambiguity (1995)). Creativeness, it must surely be agreed, is directly accessible *through* language, and thus to everyone. As such, this book has little to say in answer to that perennial question of 'where do ideas come from?', other than: 'often, from creative use of language itself'.

However, this book is not only about creative writing; it is also about 'doing stylistics from the inside'. Thus, it will be of benefit to those studying stylistics as a whole, as well as language, linguistics and literature more generally. The goal of 'doing stylistics' will become exactly that: a practical exploration of the tenets of the discipline.

What is stylistics?

For readers coming to this topic with little or no knowledge of stylistics, it will be useful now to provide a brief summary of the subject. This is no easy task, however, as modern stylistics is a broad and diverse church. Put as simply as possible, stylistics explores how readers interact with the language of texts in order to explain how we understand, and are affected by, texts when we read them. The goal of this book, as should by now be clear, is to travel in the other direction through that paradigm: from writer to text to reader. A short history of the discipline's development and influences should help clarify this goal.

Stylistics as an academic discipline stands on the border between language and literary studies, and has feet in both camps. However, it is, at heart, a sub-discipline of linguistics, combining the use of linguistic analysis with what psychologists have uncovered about the cognitive processes involved in reading. Despite its roots in linguistics[3], stylistics is in many ways a logical extension of the classical poetics of both Plato and Aristotle, and moves within literary criticism early in the twentieth century to concentrate on studying texts rather than their writers: in Western Europe and America, Practical Criticism, and in Eastern Europe and Russia, Formalism. In England, the literary critic I.A. Richards and his student, William Empson, dismissed the nineteenth-century critical obsession with authors and their social contexts in favour of criticism that took as its object the literary text itself and how readers read it, an approach which became known as Practical Criticism (closely related to New Criticism in the US). These scholars were interested primarily in the language of texts, and describing how appropriately trained

and acute critics such as themselves were affected by them. Arguably, this approach to studying literature still predominates in schools and universities in Europe and the US. Students write essays in which they assert a point about a particular text and their reading of it, and then discuss a short excerpt from that text in order to back that reading up. A stylistician would assert that this approach is inadequate when arguing for a particular view of text, especially when that view is based on textual analysis or close reading. Intuition is not enough; we should both analyse the text in detail and take account of what we understand about how people read when arguing for particular views of texts. Nevertheless, the stylistics approach to literature certainly grows from the inferences of Practical Criticism and New Criticism: that the proper object of study is the text itself.

There is another important strand in the development of stylistics (in which Roman Jakobson was involved) that comes from Eastern Europe and Russia. In the early years of the twentieth century, the members of the Linguistic Circle in Moscow (usually called the Russian Formalists), like Richards and Empson, also rejected undue concentration on the author in literary criticism in favour of an approach which favoured the analysis of the language of the text in relation to psychological effects of that linguistic structure. The group contained linguists, literary critics and psychologists, and they (along with the Prague Linguistic Circle, with whom Jakobson was associated) began to develop what became a very influential aspect of textual study in later stylistics, called **foregrounding theory**. This view suggested that some parts of texts had more effect on readers than others in terms of interpretation, because the textual parts were linguistically deviant or specially patterned in some way, thus making them psychologically salient (or 'foregrounded') for readers. In short, an unusual linguistic usage would be foregrounded against the 'background' of standard language, and thus would stand out.[4] The Russian Formalists were, in effect, the first stylisticians. Another important scholar connected to Formalism is Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work on the narrative 'voices' of the novel and their relationships to the diversity and conflicts within language in its totality should be of great interest to both the stylistician and the creative writer.

Jakobson himself became one of the most influential linguists of the twentieth century, and the reason for his considerable influence on stylistics was because he wove the various threads of linguistics together, seeing, for example, the poetic function of language as fundamental to *all* language use, not just to that which we customarily view as 'literary'.

He left Moscow after the revolution and moved to Prague, where he became a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, whose members were also exploring the same themes: how the language of texts affects readers. Subsequently, after the invasion of the then-Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union, he moved to the US, bringing with him the approach to the study of literary texts which later became called stylistics. His work was taken to heart by those who wanted to push Practical and New Criticism in more precise, analytical directions.

As well as classical poetics, Western European Practical Criticism/ American New Criticism and the Russian Formalists, any potted history of stylistics must also mention **narratology**, a discipline which has myriad applications to creative practice and which was also influenced by both classical poetics and Russian Formalism. Stylistics has many interconnections with narratology (Shen 2007), and together they give an intricate account of narrative function and effect on two levels: that of *story* and of *discourse*, corresponding to the Formalist distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet* (Propp 1968; Shklovsky 1965). From the first, we gain insight into plot structure (e.g. the simple linear plot of exposition, complication, climax, resolution) and simple versus complex structures (the ways in which the time of the discourse need not correspond to the time of the story it mediates; more on this shortly). The second level explores the complex interrelationships between authorial voice, narrator voice and character voice, the various methods of representing discourse (speech, thought, writing), and also the essential distinction between point of view (who tells) and focalisation (who sees).

Initially, narratology was associated with structuralism (due to its attempt to model the underlying patterns of narrative universally), but has now become more 'catholic' in its ambitions, having applications to disciplines as diverse as psychology (e.g. the study of memory), anthropology (e.g. the evolution of folk traditions) and even philosophy (especially ethics). Narratologists such as Propp (1928), Todorov (1977), Genette (1980) and Greimas (1983) deconstructed the machinery of narrative with a view to putting together a narrative 'grammar' which would be as rigorous and universal as, say, accounts of syntax in linguistics. However, some modern theorists have argued that this formal grammar of narrative now seems a little 'clunky' and 'unnecessarily scientific' (Van Loon 2007: 19). The questions it explores are highly relevant to the writer, though. What drives the machinery of narrative? What makes reading compelling? How can we as writers apply the insights of narratology to the act of creating narrative fiction (and, indeed, poetry)?

As a summarising justification for the approaching of creative practice via and through stylistics and narratology, it will be useful to turn to Michael Toolan (1998: ix) for support:

> [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.
>
> <div align="right">[My emphasis]</div>

What applications might the stylistics toolkit have in the *production* of the literary text, not just in its analysis by academic critics 'post-event'? Of course, the most obvious answer to that question is: during the editorial phase of the creative process, that is, during re-reading and re-writing. Stylistics, as Toolan suggests, can help identify and, crucially, account for moments of 'excellence' as well as parts of the work which are less successful. However, I would like to suggest that the stylistics 'toolkit' and the insights it provides into literary process *can become an integral part of creative practice itself.* Its precepts can inform the way you write, *as* you write.

Stylistics also has the potential to complement and augment current creative writing pedagogy in the academy (and beyond) by providing a detailed and rigorous critical taxonomy with which to describe the key issues of both craft and reader reception that come up for discussion time and time again in creative writing workshops. I have lost count of the number of times I have sat in or led writing workshops, or been a part of reading groups, to find a particular technical or reading issue comes up which participants struggle to articulate clearly. I find myself thinking, 'Stylistics has a word for this…'.

A note of caution, though. As I have already hinted, it is no way the intention of this book to suggest that creative writers *must* engage with stylistics. Such a proposition would be patently absurd. You do not need to understand stylistics to be a good writer. My hope, though, is to point to the various ways in which a practical exploration of stylistics through writing rather than just reading can benefit both the

creative writer and the student of stylistics, or anyone with an interest in the mechanics of language; indeed, I would venture that anyone with a desire to write creatively must have, by definition, an interest in these things. Rather than showing the only way to write well, combining stylistics and creative writing provides opportunities to explore how you *can* write, to avoid certain common pitfalls of the beginning writer, and, at the very least, to consider in depth the question posed by Toolan above: why *these* words, and not others?

The structure of this book

The book is divided into nine chapters, with an appendix at the end. Each chapter is sub-divided several times according to theme, so you can if you wish home in on the particular theme that interests you without reading through the book as a whole. There is some inevitable overlap between the chapters, as it is often difficult to separate the various aspects of stylistics and narratology neatly from one another, and the relevance of one aspect for creative writers may be similar in vein to the relevance of another. However, where this overlap is unavoidable, every attempt has been made to cross-reference to other chapters where similar topics are discussed. Each chapter will also contain exercises, some in the course of the chapter itself but most at the end. Some exercises are 'standalone' explorations of the particular topic under discussion, while others can be applied to work in progress – a creative project that you are working on already, or one that you start with the book. **The book aims to address the writing of both narrative fiction *and* poetry**; as such, many of the stylistic principles and exercises will be relevant and applicable to both genres (indeed, there are many obvious and fruitful interfaces between them). However, where a section or exercise is aimed explicitly at one or the other, this should be apparent.

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