

Book Review Article

The Contemporary Verse Novel: An Explosion of Poetic Narrative

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The Golden Gate

by Vikram Seth

New York: Faber & Faber,
1987, 308 pp.

ISBN: 0571148271

Omeros

by Derek Walcott

London: Faber & Faber,
1990, 325 pp.

ISBN: 0571144594

Lara

by Bernadine Evaristo

Tunbridge Wells: Angela Royal,
Publishing, 1997, 147 pp.

ISBN: 1899860452

The Emperor's Babe

by Bernadine Evaristo

London: Penguin,
2002, 253 pp.

ISBN: 0140297812

Bloodlines

by Fred D'Aguiar

London: Vintage,
2001, 161 pp.

ISBN: 0099284421

Whylah Falls

by George Elliott Clarke

Vancouver: Polestar Book,
Publishers, 2000, 206 pp.

ISBN: 189609550X

Sinking

by Michael Cawood Green

London: Penguin,
1997, 164 pp.

ISBN: 014058790X

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I. Introduction and Background

Ever since the appearance in 1986 of Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*, novels in verse have been the *dernier cri* of literary fashion in the English-speaking world. From Australia to the USA, from the *avant garde* to the establishment, writers of both poetry and fiction have taken up this hybrid form with enthusiasm. New titles have appeared monthly since the millennium, often declaring their genre explicitly. 'A Verse Novel' or 'A Novel in Verse' must be among the commonest subtitles of the twenty-first century.

This paper will briefly review several recent texts in the process of charting the origins and growth of the contemporary verse novel explosion. This introduction begins with a short defence of the genre, and then provides a sampling of its history and development up until the late twentieth century. Later sections will focus on the six individual works, sketching at the same time the genre's evolution up to the present. The selection of texts reviewed was governed by a consideration of the verse novel's relevance to African and South African contexts.

Purists, of course, might be tempted to deny this genre's existence, since narrative poems have always existed and the novel is a rather recent, essentially prose phenomenon. Certainly, the new texts calling themselves verse novels are longish narrative poems, many of them clearly related to older poetry of this type, particularly epics and romances.

But genres are not closed, mutually exclusive categories. This is especially true of the novel, which, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1981:5) claims, has a marked tendency to incorporate other genres into itself. Why not then poetry? There has been a noticeable tendency among prose novels in the past few decades—predating the outburst of verse novels—to embed poetry into their narratives. Memorable examples occur in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), in D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981), in A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) and even Salman Rushdie's recent *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (2000), in which the lyrics of rock songs written and performed by the main characters feature as an integral part of the text.

This is not to say that including a little poetry in a mainly prose narrative is the same as writing a novel entirely in verse. But it does demonstrate the novel's versatility, its potential for encompassing different voices and styles. And no reason absolutely forbids those more self-reflexive, more stylized, sometimes more emotionally charged voices expressible in verse from embodying all of a novel; for, as Bakhtin (1981:4-11) also claims, the

novel is essentially a dialogic, experimental genre, defying strict definition by its continual protean self-transformations. If the novel could, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, already include such extremes as the works of Jane Austen and of Laurence Sterne, then it is no surprise that it could tolerate the invention of the verse novel not long afterwards. To add formal verse to its possibilities was not to catalyse the most daring metamorphoses of which the genre is capable.

So much for the novel; but what about poetry? If it is easy enough to distinguish a verse novel from a prose novel, it is not so simple to distinguish a verse novel from a narrative poem that has no novelistic pretensions. Here, we find, the defining features are mostly less objective than subjective, the intentions of author or reader playing a decisive role. As long as a poem is conceivably narrative, its parts in some way continuous one with another and the whole thing at least the length of a short book, an argument can surely be made for its status as a verse novel. Obviously, however, particular readers' ways of seeing novels will influence their categorization of specific poems as verse novels. Readers in the line of Bakhtin (1981:3-40), who defines novels in opposition to epics, and those like Northrop Frye (1957:304-314), who distinguishes them from confessions, anatomies and romances, will develop quite different systems of inclusion and exclusion.

But the novel in verse is after all not a very new phenomenon, its age perhaps lending it some respectability. The first famous work to display the defining subtitle, 'A Novel in Verse', may have been Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, which appeared in Russian in 1833. Apart from its composition in stanzas, it is relatively conventional as nineteenth century novels go. Its story is contemporaneous with its writing, it deals with well-to-do people in society, focuses on love and love's relationship to marriage, includes both country-house and city settings and is ultimately sympathetic to a female viewpoint. What makes it delightful is its narrator's playful wit, which, though made integral to the structure of the verse, is nevertheless at least as novelistic as it is a poetic feature.

Having accepted *Eugene Onegin*, thus designated by its author, as a verse novel, we may be constrained to label at least one earlier work in the same way. Byron's *Don Juan*, produced between 1818 and 1824, is so clearly the model not only for *Eugene Onegin* but for other verse novels by Pushkin that it should surely be categorized as a verse novel too. Though Byron (1926:648) described his own poem as 'epic', its comic, rambling, shaggy-dog narrative clearly resembles an eighteenth century novelistic comic epic such as

Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones* (1749) more than a 'true' epic. This is a point that Pushkin clearly appreciated.

Probably the first English work described by its author as a 'novel-poem' was Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, a gently feminist story of a woman poet, published in 1856. A handful of other nineteenth century works were also recognized as verse novels by their authors, including 'Owen Meredith's *Lucile* (1860) and 'Violet Fane's *Denzil Place* (1875). Professors of literature offering courses on the Victorian Verse Novel tend to add other titles to this list, for example, Clough's *The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich* (1848) and *Amours de Voyage* (1858), George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862), Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9) and even, amazingly, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859)—though his less popular *The Princess* (1847), having contemporary subject-matter, might fit the category better.

Clearly, the genre, once accepted, may be cut to fit almost any long poem that we may like to put in it—but this does tend to be true of genres. And some family resemblances can be discerned by the believer. What all these long narrative nineteenth century texts have in common—with the possible exception of *Idylls of the King*—is that they are realistic and that they pay close attention to human behaviour in society. Except for the Arthurian *Idylls of the King* and the Italian-Renaissance *The Ring and the Book*, they all have contemporary settings. However, their use of poetic verse form is totally variable. Aspects of theme, setting and treatment, in other words, are what mainly determine categorization as 'verse novels'. Those poems that resemble the typical Victorian prose novel most closely in these aspects are of course most likely to be thus classified. Whether they be in blank verse (as is *Aurora Leigh*), *ottava rima* stanzas (*Don Juan*) or even anapaestic tetrameter couplets (*Lucile*) is not the issue.

Less than two decades ago, the verse novel was regarded as extinct. A largely nineteenth century phenomenon, it could be examined in its entirety in a graduate seminar. Term papers, like epitaphs, dispassionately accounted for its demise. During the great part of the twentieth century, the writing of narrative poetry had come almost to a standstill and long poems, when they did appear, focussed mainly on the epiphanic moment and consisted of a series of lyrics. Two recently rediscovered exceptions to this rule are Joseph Moncure March's *The Wild Party* (1928) and 'Susan Miles's *Lettice Delmer* (1958), both of which are obviously verse novels. *The Wild Party* is a hard-boiled tale about the showgirl Queenie and her amours, written in racy rhyming jazz rhythms: "'Jes's Christ!— / I've hurt my shin:—" / The door sprang open / And the cops rushed

in' (1928:n.p.). *Lettice Delmer* belongs to the tradition of *Aurora Leigh*, being composed in blank verse and narrating the ruin of a respectable young woman during the First World War in London. But apart from another work by March (*The Set-Up* 1928), little else that could be called a verse novel was to appear until the last decades of the century.

II. *The Golden Gate* and its Aftermath

Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*, appearing in 1986, was the great catalyst of the present verse novel explosion. This culturally hybrid book, authored by an Indian, set in late twentieth century San Francisco and composed in the complex Russian stanzas of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, is unmistakably a verse novel. The term would have had to be coined for it had it not already existed. The narrative's focus is the everyday life of a group of young Americans who go to work, fall in love and into bed with each other, quarrel about pets, politics and religion, protest about the environment, consume coffee, get drunk, have car accidents and worry about their parents. The plot is well structured and ends with a marriage and a death. Despite the difficult stanza, dialogue is frequent and sounds quite 'natural'. This is of course the great feature of *The Golden Gate*. Including breezy authorial asides, it tells a fairly mundane tale well—and realistically—using a form too complex to have been invented in English. Pushkin's stanza was designed for a language more rife with rhymes than this one. The basic pattern is ABABCCDDEFFEGG, hard enough as it stands, but the real snag is an alternation between masculine and feminine rhyme. The A-rhymes are all compulsorily feminine (involving a repetition of two syllables), as are C, E and G. Masculine rhymes (repeating one syllable only) are mandatory for B, D and F. To manage this stanza successfully in English—which has been done before only in verse translations of *Eugene Onegin*, as far as I know—is a feat of virtuosity almost unprecedented in this rhyme-poor language. And *The Golden Gate* consists of over 600 of these stanzas. Thus, reading the text is an experience of dizzying fluctuations between consciousness of technique and consciousness of story. The fictional tale is so matter-of-factly 'real' that its illusion sucks us in and yet the style of writing is so 'artificial' that we must gasp regularly at its daring, dragging ourselves outside the illusion to admire:

Lights flash. 'Oh God! This means a ticket'.

The siren wails. John brakes. 'Well, I'm
Just going to tell them they can stick it ...'.
A cop comes. 'Licence please This time
It's just a fine. The speed you're going
Is hazardous. How about slowing
Your place a little, Mr. Brown?'
John hears him with a restive frown,
With more impatience than repentance.
'Officer, work begins at eight'.
The cop says, 'Better late than "late"',
Signing his ticket on that sentence.
'Have a good day, now!' But John, cross,
Can't work, and quarrels with his boss (2.9 - p28).

This colloquial effect with the simultaneous formal density is the Byronic experience *par excellence* of course, and Seth's inheritance via Pushkin of the mode is perfectly legitimate. However, Byron and Pushkin both chose stanzas that were better adapted to the languages they were writing in. *The Golden Gate* at its best is very good, but in the long haul one encounters many stanzas for which the epithet 'doggerel' hovers at the tip of one's tongue.

Now although, as mentioned, *The Golden Gate* has operated as a catalyst for the production of scores of other verse novels, it spawned only one close stylistic copy. This novel, a whodunnit by the veteran British crime writer H.R.F. Keating, is called *Jack the Lady Killer* (1999), a title actually invented by Seth for an imaginary book that is read by one of his characters in *The Golden Gate*. But Keating, though he accepts the tetrameter and basic rhyme pattern of Pushkin's stanza, draws the line at the masculine-feminine alternation in the rhyme scheme—and sensibly so, in a language in which it has never been a convention. Keating justifies his foray into verse after a long career in prose in two interesting ways. He claims on the one hand that 'writing in verse, far from being an obstacle to easy reading, is a positive inducement to continue turning the pages' (Keating 2002:n.p.) and on the other that the verse form 'allows one to say extra things which might never have risen from the subconscious if one were writing straightforward prose' (Keating ['Preface'] 1999:n.p.). How ironic this is! Only a short time ago poetry was one of the great turnoffs for the middlebrow reader; and, for the critic at least, the capacity of formal verse to make an author say something that he or she hadn't intended was seen as kind of secret shame (Lodge 1977:89).

Jack the Lady Killer appeared as late as 1999 and was already not a single copy of an original but part of a definite trend. By then scores of new verse novels were being printed, as in the nineteenth century in a great variety of different styles and verse forms. They were also being written in many different parts of the world by people from a variety of ethnic origins. Australia may be a world leader in the form, with the groundbreaking work of figures such as Dorothy Porter (*Akhenaten* [1992]; *The Monkey's Mask* [1997]; *Wild Surmise* [2002]), Les Murray (*The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* [1980], *Fredy Neptune* [1999]) and Alan Wearne (*The Nightmarkets* [1986], *The Lovemakers* [2002]) being imitated or innovated upon by numerous other writers. But most English-language countries have produced at least one verse novel and it may be more interesting to classify these texts by content than by country of origin. Subject-matter includes science fiction (Frederick Turner, *The New World* [1985], Frederick Pollack, *Happiness* [1998], John Barnie, *Ice* [2001]), stories based on classical myth (Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red* [1998]; *Akhenaten*), community and family histories (Craig Raine, *History: The Home Movie* [1994]; Brad Leithauser, *Darlington's Fall* [2002]), fictional community and family histories (David Budbill, *Judevine* [1991]; Anthony Burgess, *Byrne* [1995]; Siddharth Katragadda, *Dark Rooms* [2002]), mysteries (*The Monkey's Mask*; *Jack the Lady-Killer*, Martha Grimes, *Send Bygraves* [1989]), love (Marilyn Hacker, *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* [1986]; Anne Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband* [2002]), documentaries (Jordie Albiston, *The Hanging of Jean Lee* [1998]; Mary Jo Bang, *Louise in Love* [2001]) and fiction for children and young adults (Virginia Euwer Wolff, *Make Lemonade* [1993]; Juan Felipe Herrera, *Crashboomlove* [1999])¹.

If there is any one feature that binds all—or most of—these texts together it is probably their relationship to popular literature. Even though a significant proportion of them use strict verse forms, these are not works composed for a university audience only—unlike a good many of the more 'difficult' poems of the twentieth century (Lake 1999:30). The explicit aim of many of these poets, as Dana Gioia (1999:34, 39) among several contributors to a book on contemporary 'formal' poetry points out, is to appeal to the broad readership of the novel. It seems that Keating is not the only writer to see a potential for page-turners in long verse narratives. And even in their poetic

¹ It will be noticed that one or two of these verse novels actually appeared before Seth's 1986 *The Golden Gate*, suggesting that *The Golden Gate* itself may have been just a part—albeit an important part—of a trend already begun.

forebears, many recent verse novels show more influence from populist forms such as jazz songs and folk tales than any highbrow academic tradition.

III. *Omeros* and the African Connection

There is, of course, an African element to this new trend, though it is less dominant in Africa itself than in the diaspora. For probably the best poetic narrative to appear in print since the trend's beginnings is the Caribbean Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, published in 1990. This work is usually categorized not as a verse novel but as an epic, which is clearly what its author intended, considering that its title is the Greek name of Homer, that it contains characters called Hector, Achille and Helen, and that its stanza is an adaptation of *terza rima*, the form invented by Dante for his *Divine Comedy*. Certainly the poem has epic dimensions, for it pulls together history and traditions from Europe, Africa and the Caribbean, while still creating and transmitting the national myth of a particular place: St. Lucia, the island of Walcott's birth. But, as previously mentioned, genres are not exclusive categories, especially not the novel. *Omeros* is as much novel as epic. Its characters are nearly as realistically—and certainly as sympathetically—drawn as in a nineteenth novel like 'George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-1872). For example, the elderly Plunketts, a British colonial couple, are finely observed in their frailties, disappointments and kindnesses, just as are the West Indian characters in their love triangles, their poverty, their heroic struggles with the sea, their postcolonial plight. If the style displays the dreaming, contemplative diffuseness of much lyric poetry, this should not exclude the work from the novel genre. Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) is no less lyrical despite being in prose, and *The Waves* is generally accepted as a novel.

Omeros succeeds resoundingly where *The Golden Gate* and other recent novels in formal verse do not because it achieves exactly the right innovation on the traditional versification. *Terza rima*, unlike Pushkin's stanza, is well-suited to the English language and has been used in it successfully before (for example, by Shelley in 'Ode to the West Wind' and 'The Triumph of Life'). This invention of Dante's is not exactly a stanza so much as a running design, with the enclosed end syllable of one tercet reappearing as the enclosing rhyme of the next: ABA BCB CDC DED... etc. What Walcott does in *Omeros* is to apply the verse's rules only loosely, approaching and withdrawing from the pattern according to the exigencies of his discourse, so that at times he appears to be writing a kind of free verse:

Plunkett never thought he would ask the next question.

'Heaven?' He smiled.

'Yes. If heaven is a green place'.

And her shut eyes watered while his own were open.

That moment bound him for good to another race.

Then the Major said, 'Tell her something for me, please'.

'She can hear you', the *gardeuse* said. 'Just like in life'.

'Tell her', said the Major, clearing his throat, 'the keys . . .
that time when I slammed them, I'm sorry that I caused her
all that pain. Tell her'—he stopped—'that no other wife

would have borne so much'. He lifted the small saucer
where the candle had shrunk to a stub, and he edged
a twenty-dollar bill under it, near the Bible. (307)

But this moving little passage in which Plunkett consults the obeah-woman, Ma Kilman, in order to communicate with his recently-dead wife is not actually 'free' at all. The line chosen is very regular but more subtle than the traditional English iambic pentameter, being measured in syllables rather than in stresses or beats per line. Nearly every line comprises exactly twelve syllables and yet, like most syllabic effects in English, this regularity remains subliminal for the average reader. As for the *terza rima* rhymes, some are imperfect, as is 'question/open' in the enclosing lines of the first tercet, and some are non-existent, as in the enclosing lines of all the other tercets. But the pattern does not disappear completely, for the rhyme linking the enclosed line of one tercet with the opening line of the next is characteristically present, as in all cases here: 'place/race', 'please/keys', 'caused her/saucer'. This haunting but insistent formal presence comprises the very flexible basis of the work's brilliance. Walcott's apparent compromise is an inspired choice for an age in which a repeated formal pattern can seem overly self-conscious.

IV. *Lara and The Emperor's Babe*

Omeros, being epic in scope, covers both the origins and the present dispersal of the West Indian people who are its chief focus. In addition to sections set in

America and in several of the great cosmopolitan cities of the world, it includes one that follows Achille on a visionary journey across the ocean and back in time to West Africa in the age of slavery, where he meets his own ancestors and lives with them for a while. This fictional return seems to have struck a chord with other poets of the African diaspora, who have followed Walcott's lead in using the verse novel to trace, unravel and lay claim to roots.

Perhaps most influenced by this section of *Omeros* is Bernadine Evaristo's *Lara*, published in 1997. The eponymous heroine of this free-verse work is, like Evaristo, a black Englishwoman, claiming both Irish and Nigerian ancestry. The book is a contemporary coming-of-age story, culminating in a visit by Lara and her family to Nigeria. This visit, which is a return for her father, is a significant event that lays ghosts and establishes Lara's identity as a black woman, proud of her heritage. Nevertheless, the visit also catalyses a realization that the whole book has been leading up to, of the totality of Lara's inheritance, from both black and white sources, and of the fact of her irreducibly modern selfhood, distinct from all her origins and forebears. The poem ends with her flying 'Back to London' where she feels she belongs, 'step[ping] out of Heathrow and into [her] future' (1997:140).

Evaristo, who was in South Africa in 2000 as writer-in-residence at the University of the Western Cape, pursues a similar theme of origins in her later verse novel, *The Emperor's Babe*. In the light of new evidence of African people's existence in Britain as long ago as Roman times, this book tells the tragic tale of Zuleika, a beautiful, air-headed black girl-woman, who is married forcibly at the age of eleven to a Roman dignitary and later becomes mistress to the emperor Severus, himself African. The narration is unfortunately prone to silliness, with a kind of Asterix version of Latin ('*fatuo-off, you little runt*' [2001:10]), Roman London really being just contemporary London, with a few classical allusions added: 'just off the olive barge from Gaul' (2001:4); 'Za Za, you were da bomb' (2001:210);

Cheers!

To Managing Director of six hundred
squabbling, back-stabbing Board of Directors
running international Firm on Palatine Hill (2001:144).

The free verse in *The Emperor's Babe* uses a shorter line than *Lara*, and is arranged into brief, two-line 'stanzas' which suit its racy dialogue well. Like many of the free-verse novels that have come out in the past few years, both of

these are divided into short titled sections, resembling lyrics. But this resemblance does not always go very deep. Little of the dreamy, linguistically beautiful reflectiveness evident in *Omeros* enters Evaristo's verse. It gets on with the job of developing its characters and telling its tale. Her books differ from prose novels largely in their brevity—of both line and statement—which gives their discourse a more sketchy, enigmatic quality. Perhaps these and many other verse novels should be equated with short stories rather than with full-length novels, for the large amount of white space on many of their pages ensures that the word count is not comparable, page for page, with prose narratives. As a short story or novella must often leave a great deal of context unexplained or undeveloped, so with these verse tales.

V. *Bloodlines*

Fred D'Aguiar's *Bloodlines*, published in 2001, is another story of origins by a black writer influenced by Walcott. Although D'Aguiar grew up Guyana and England, he is at present living in America and this verse novel is a tale of slavery in the southern States. The main protagonist, as in *Lara*, is the result of a mixed-race liaison and hence, like her, he traces his 'bloodlines' through both black and white ancestors. What is arresting about the story of his making is not that it begins with a rape but that it ends with a passionate love affair strong enough to destroy the lives of both parents—the white boy who is brutalized by other whites because of his love for a black slave as well as the black girl who dies in childbirth, still a slave, the lovers' bid for freedom defeated. Despite telling a grim and violent tale, the poem is a paean to love and love's power to overcome prejudice and hatred. It is interesting formally, for it uses the *ottava rima* stanza beloved of Ariosto and Byron but transforms it in a way reminiscent of Walcott's liberties with *terza rima*. *Ottava rima* rhymes ABABABCC, its final couplet giving it potential for comedy and for decisive closure. But, since *Bloodlines* is seldom comic and its narrative does not always require discreteness in its parts, D'Aguiar underplays the stanza by using a prose-like, normally ten-syllable line, by frequently rhyming imperfectly and by enjambling the lines so strongly that even perfect rhymes are almost inaudible. Of course, when he does provide end-stopped lines with good rhymes the resonance is unmistakable—an effect he exploits for emphasis and irony:

I did not mean your people to despise

you for loving me. If I could rub off the black
and be like you, to be with you . . . I realize
that I can't. I am black from head to toe, back
and front, black gums, black cuticles, black eyes.
You thought me beautiful, black made you ache
for more black, so much black I turned you blue,
your white became black and I became you. (2001:55)

This stanza, embodying the internal monologue of the pregnant Faith, includes a majority of run-on lines and the very imperfect rhyme 'back/ache'. But the final couplet has end-stopped lines and a noticeable, perfect rhyme, 'blue/you'. After all the repetitions of 'black', the alliterative 'blue' is a surprise; but the 'you' (Christy) has indeed been made 'blue' in two senses (sad and bruised) by his love for Faith. And this new colour, overriding the endless contradictions of 'black' and 'white', echoes a motif elsewhere in the poem that envisages love painting all things 'from pillar to post' in new colours, 'Raceless / like light' (2001:54).

VI. *Whylah Falls*

Although 'Bloodlines' employs different narrators in different sections, its style is consistent and the story that it tells develops fairly simply and coherently for its reader. The Canadian George Elliot Clarke's *Whylah Falls* (1990), which also tells stories about North American black identity and origin, has no such simple coherence. Although the book is often described as a verse novel², the author appears in his 'Introduction to the Tenth Anniversary Edition' to regard it as an 'extended lyric sequence' (1990:xvi), which he defends as a viable genre against the now-dead but lamented epic. In the same introduction, he connects *Whylah Falls* with the 'mixed media' of Jean Toomer's (1923) *Cane*—a pioneer work of the Harlem Renaissance.

Clarke's text is certainly composed in fairly self-contained pieces, many of which are assuredly able to stand on their own as lyrics. But each one does in fact contribute to a gradually-unfolding narrative—or set of linked narratives—whose characters are all members of the same small, tightly-knit

² See, for example, the following Canadian writers' websites: <http://www.athabasca.ca/writers/geclarke.html>; http://www.cbc.ca/canadareads/cr_2002/books2.html.

community: the fictional town of Whydah Falls, Nova Scotia, during the 1930s. Significant events, such as a murder and the consummation of several love affairs, do take shape the text progresses, but the narrative does not focus mainly on action. As in *Omeros*, it moves in the drifting, thoughtful, linguistically innovative manner of the lyric, shifting suddenly on occasion to angry satire:

Night wields its death blow, nullifying
The trains that writhe across this map, stilling
The crows that crack the air with blackened cries.
Cora mourns her son, Othello Clemence,
Who, shot down by Scratch Seville, dreamt and bled
Too much. He dropped in the garden where he
Had crawled, bowled over, like a dog. Then, bright,
Enthusiastic machines stormed his last
Self-defence with morphine. In court, Scratch joked,
'Self-defence'. His white-wash jury guffawed.
No death is neutral anymore. (122)

Nevertheless, as Clarke claims, this founding tale of south-west Nova Scotia's African-Canadian population (composed of descendants of escaped slaves from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) does belong to the tradition of Toomer's *Cane* as well as to the contemporary verse novel trend. For not all of the sections are composed in verse; many of them—mostly the longer ones—are in prose, or prose-poetry. And the variety of narrators, who usually begin their narration at the beginning of new sections without authorial explanation or transition, remind the reader at times more of dialogue, or monologue, in the dramatic mode than of novelistic narration. Thus, at a stretch, the work could be seen as 'us[ing] the mixed media of poetry, prose, song, and play to achieve the same effect in *Cane*' (xvi). However, *Whydah Falls* differs from *Cane* in one important feature already mentioned: its sections, though formally distinct and self-contained, all comprise part of a noticeably continuous world. The same characters crop up in section after section, events narrated in previous sections have an impact on later episodes, characters remember incidents and suffer or benefit from them in the future. Though time is not always presented as a simple chronology, flash-backs and -forwards are identifiable as part of a coherent sequence. *Cane*, in contrast, consists of a series of wholly distinct lyrical, narrative and dramatic pieces. Names from one section do not recur in

others. Only the places and time—rural Georgia and certain American cities in the early twentieth century—hold the work together, as well as some recurrent themes. *Cane* is not a verse novel, though it includes both poetry and stories. *Whydah Falls* may be a verse novel if the reader wants it to be.

VI. African Contributions and *Sinking*

Authors actually resident on the African continent have not mostly taken up the genre with the same enthusiasm as writers of the diaspora. Recently, and probably in the light of the new popularity of the genre overseas, some commentators have started calling Okot p'Bitek's long poems, including *Song of Lawino* (1966) and *Song of Ocol* (1970), verse novels³. These earlier texts are, indeed, book-length and at least partially narrative, with idiosyncratic narrators who reveal themselves in the process of telling other members of their community (and, of course, the reader or audience) about each other. Nevertheless, the author's stated aim is to copy not the Western novel so much as a traditional Acoli song, or poem. p'Bitek originally wrote his *Songs* in Acoli, a language spoken in Uganda, and then translated them into English free verse himself. And although they do share features with novels, they are in many crucial ways more dramatic than novelistic. Each is supposed to be uttered by a single character in front of a community of listeners. *Song of Lawino* is a public complaint by a wife against her husband Ocol, who has become Westernized and now despises her, her cooking, her personal habits, her family, her customs, her gods, and everything else about her. *Song of Ocol*, spoken entirely in his voice, is Ocol's criticism not only of Lawino but of the corrupt and chaotic state of post-colonial Uganda in general. The books are thus not only more like drama than the novel, echoing as they do an oral performance genre, but also they have a more directly rhetorical form than most novels. A more recent translation than p'Bitek's own of *Song of Lawino* actually envisages the text as a legal defence, not a poem or a narrative (p'Bitek 2001; Garuba 2003).

More recently and nearer home, concerted attempts have been made to initiate hybrid literary forms, the results of which could conceivably resemble verse novels. The term 'proemdra', which Mthobi Mutloatse coined in 1980 (Zander 1999:15) for a distinctively South African genre invented in polemical

³ See, for example, the online paragraph on p'Bitek at www.africanfront.com/a-names.php and the online encyclopaedia entries at <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=60320> and <http://www.bartleby.com/65/pb/pBitek-O.html>.

opposition to what he saw as chauvinistic Western literary conventions (Mutloatse 1980:5), has been bandied about a good deal since then, though not many actual 'proemdras' have appeared in print. Supposed to consist, as *Cane* does, of a mixture of prose, poetry and drama, 'proemdras' have so far tended to be much shorter than novels. An exception to this rule is Mtutuzeli Matshoba's book-length *Seeds of War* (1981), but this work contains far more prose and drama than poetry. In fact, the only poetic sections are a few freedom songs and 'Nkosi Sikeleli, Africa', which are included in the text (Matshoba 1981:36-37, 24-25). The book thus cannot be classified as a verse novel, however the genre is stretched.

Michael Cawood Green's *Sinking*, published in 1997, was probably influenced by both local rhetoric about the 'proemdra' and the resurgence overseas of the verse novel. On its cover, *Sinking* is subtitled 'A Verse Novella', but it may fit the 'proemdra' genre better. This more comprehensively mixed genre is what I take the much longer subtitle appearing on the book's title page to suggest: 'A Story of the Disaster Which Took Place at the Blyvooruitzicht Mine, Far West Rand, on 3 August 1964 (Being a History, Romance, Allegory, Prophecy, Survey, Domestic Drama—and None of the Above)'. For *Sinking* includes nearly as much prose as verse, if you count the many substantial quotations that appear as headnotes to sections as well as the sections composed entirely of prose. And, although none of its parts is actually written in dramatic form, the changing of speakers and narrators from section to section, as in *Whylah Falls*, gives an effect similar to dramatic dialogue.

The book tells the true story of a household that disappeared down a sinkhole near Carletonville in the 1960s. It tells this story from many different perspectives and, of course, finds the white family's dilemma, living unconsciously over, and then sinking into, the abyss, symbolic of the South African situation at the time. The characters are not given any opportunity to develop or round out, but this may be typical of verse novels which, as mentioned before, often display the enigmatic sparseness of the short story rather than the encyclopaedic density of the novel. Here in addition, however, a carefully constructed distance interposed between discourse and characters is reminiscent of the prose novels of J.M. Coetzee, whose layers of intellectual alienation this narrative strives to overreach. And overreach them it does in the later sections, which, like those of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), abandon verse, transforming instead into a series of increasingly self-reflexive commentaries and appendices to the verse sections that precede them. The text is a network and echolalia of quotations—extracts from Jacques Derrida,

Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Neitzsche as well a smorgasbord of historians and literary authors heading the sections, while the sections themselves include all sorts of 'found objects', epitaphs, reports, bits of newspaper articles and even an Afrikaans poem reproduced in its entirety, but with its original lines interlarded with English translations. In between, the narrator is constantly plucking the reader by the sleeve and reminding her of the fictitious nature of composition and selfhood and the relation of both to history, and so on:

In making you
(Johannes, Hester,
Jacoba, Johannes, Marianne)
I (peekaboo) make myself.

Aganst you,
The vanishing family.
I adopt my position.

No voice but mine
Echoing in what is only yours
Or not mine either.

I only see you
Through certain assumptions, yes,
But where you begin to blur
Interests me the most;

It is peripheral vision,
Not hindsight,
That makes the best history. (1997:32-33)

Reading *Sinking* is, in fact, an academic exercise rather than a pleasant pastime and this distinguishes it from most verse novels of the present vogue. For, as mentioned earlier, the contemporary novel in verse is typically designed for popular consumption rather than for what Gioia calls 'the coterie culture of the universities' (1999:36).

Only one other South African work of which I am aware actually calls itself a verse novel, and this is an interactive web-based text by Michael Cope entitled *Rain*. It is as yet unpublished, though about half of it can be accessed

online at <http://www.cope.co.za/Rain.htm>. Its subtitle announces that it is a 'detective novel', but it actually bears more resemblance to a computer game. *Rain's* textual parts consist of short free-verse poems, each on a particular place, character or topic. These are not at all 'academic' poems, though, being part of an elaborate mystery or puzzle, they do contain some cryptic elements. Belonging at least partly to cyber-culture, *Rain* is potentially a populist work and thus in some ways perhaps more 'orthodox' than *Sinking*.

It would be a pity if the verse novel did not catch on in Africa—and, particularly, here in South Africa—since it seems to be a genre with a potential to remake poetry as a widely read and popular literary form once more. By moving into narrative, poetry in this genre breaks out of the potentially solipsistic confessional mode into which much lyric poetry fell during the later twentieth century. But the novel, too, is given new aesthetic life by this hybrid, whose words, lines, perhaps stanzas, all call attention to form in a way that prose does not normally do. Even a very dull reader is conscious of the crafting, of the shape, of a verse novel in a manner of which he or she might be incapable in reading a prose novel. But the best thing about the genre as it appears overseas is that it is not principally aimed at preaching so much as pleasing, and that its projected audience is no academic or specialist but an ordinary literate person who enjoys reading popular novels.

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