A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative

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The Unnaturalness of Narrative Poetry

10

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THE UNDERLYING working hypothesis of all cognitive approaches to narrative, as I understand it, is that narrative is *natural,* in the sense that it arises spontaneously among all human groups, across eras and cultures, and that wherever and whenever it occurs it displays similar features. Its ubiquity and longevity are explained by the fact that it reflects fundamental categories and processes of human cognition and experience. The baseline form of all narrative is spontaneously occurring conversational narratives of personal experience, and according to the "natural narrative" hypothesis, the cognitive parameters of natural conversational narrative remain in force even in the most sophisticated written narratives.

The boldest statement of the natural narrative hypothesis is that of Monika Fludernik, whose account of it I have been paraphrasing. Fludernik argues that we *naturalize* texts by *narrativizing* them, that is, by attempting to assimilate them to the basic template of natural conversational narrative, even (or especially) when they appear to diverge markedly from that template. For instance, conversational narratives are by definition produced by a particular person occupying a particular spatial and temporal situation, so when readers encounter written texts that appear to lack such features, they go to great lengths to supply them by projecting entities such as narrators and implied authors (Fludernik 47). Of course, there have always been texts that test the

limits of readers' ingenuity, increasingly many in the modernist and postmodernist periods, but only when narrativizing manifestly fails—for instance, in some of Beckett's late prose texts—do readers finally abandon the attempt to conform texts to the model of natural narrative. Arguably, there are no ultimately "unnatural" narratives, on this account, only texts that, though they may resist narrativization, ultimately yield to it, and those that do not, and so drop out of the category of narrative altogether.[1]

However, if in one sense there are no ultimately unnatural narratives, there are certainly *artificial* ones. Artifice and the unnatural are not necessarily identical or interchangeable. Although the two terms are near-synonyms in everyday usage, I want to distinguish between them here, at least provisionally. Unnaturalness is a question of a text's divergence from the model of natural conversational narrative. To the degree that it is naturalizable at all (see note 1), unnaturalness in narrative is naturalized by being assimilated to that model. Artifice, by contrast, cannot be naturalized in terms of the natural narrative model; it can only be *motivated* in terms of functional necessity or generic requirements or expectations.[2]

1.

From the earliest periods about which we know anything at all, natural conversational narrative has coexisted with more institutionalized narrative genres, produced under special circumstances by authorized performers instead of arising spontaneously in conversation. Conspicuous among these artificial narrative genres is *oral narrative poetry,* arguably the earliest form of *artistic* narrative, and certainly the first to leave its traces in the medium of writing. (Prose narrative, as Fludernik remarks [43], is a latecomer to writing in most vernacular literary traditions.) Thus the *diachronic* importance of narrative poetry is undeniable, as Fludernik acknowledges by making room for it in her survey of narrative in the Middle English period (though it drops out of

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1. This argument—namely that all narratives, however unnatural they may appear to be, ultimately yield to naturalization in terms of the natural narrative paradigm—could be viewed as the *weaker* version of the "unnatural narrative" hypothesis; for an exemplary statement of it, see Alber. There is also a *stronger* version of the hypothesis, one that entertains the possibility that some manifestations of narrative unnaturalness may successfully resist naturalization without thereby ceasing to be narrative; Nielsen is exemplary. See Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson for an attempt, perhaps not wholly convincing, to reconcile these versions.

2. My account of naturalization and motivation is indebted to Culler, *Structuralist* 134–60, and ultimately to the Russian formalist distinction among compositional, realistic, and aesthetic motivations.

her historical account thereafter). However, its historical importance notwithstanding, Fludernik doesn't actually devote much sustained theoretical reflection to narrative poetry. Her observations on the *interaction* of poetry and narrative in Middle English are incidental, piecemeal, and undertheorized. The verse line in saints' legends and verse romances, she observes, generally seems to correspond to the "idea units" of natural narrative (107, 115), so that prosodic units here parallel narrative units; in *Troilus and Criseyde,* by contrast, Chaucer lets narrative units overrun the divisions between his *rime royal* stanzas to accommodate long speeches and meditations (117–18).[3] These are valuable insights, but they are orphans, lacking a theoretical framework to call home.[4]

Fludernik's account here would have benefitted from a framework that allowed her to explore the relation between the narrative form of narrative poetry and whatever it is that qualifies it *as* poetry. Elsewhere (McHale, "Beginning") I have argued that this "whatever it is," the *differentia specifica* of poetry as such, is its *segmentivity.*[5] Natural narrative, of course, is also segmented, as are all verbal utterances of any kind whatsoever, but onto these "natural" systems of segmentation poetry imposes its own order, an *artificial* order comprising (depending on the poem) stanzas or sections, lines, metrical feet, down to the level of words, syllables, and even letters.[6] Poetry *spaces* language—it literally introduces white space (or, in oral poetry, pause or silence) in places where natural narrative (or written prose) has none. The multiple kinds of segmentation in a poem interact with each other in counterpoint (or *countermeasurement,* to use John Shoptaw's term),[7] producing "chords"

3. On Chaucer's use of the *rime royal* stanza, see Kinney.

4. When Fludernik revisits the question of poetry much later in the book (304–10, 354–58), her generalizations are uncharacteristically tentative and incoherent. She seems to conflate poetry with lyric (in common with many other theorists; see McHale "Beginning") and to assume that prose poetry must be allied with narrative precisely *because* its form is prose (308). In fact, much prose poetry is uncompromisingly lyrical, including that of Ponge, whom Fludernik specifically mentions in this connection.

5. My account of segmentivity derives from DuPlessis ("Codicil"). Poetry, DuPlessis writes, involves "the creation of meaningful sequence by the negotiation of gap (line-break, stanza-break, page space)." Poetry "is the kind of writing that is articulated in sequenced, gapped lines and whose meanings are created by occurring in bounded units [. . .] operating in relation to [. . .] pause or silence" ("Codicil" 51). DuPlessis did not include her one-page "Codicil on the Definition of Poetry" when she reprinted "Manifests," the essay to which it had been attached, in her book *Blue Studios* (73–95), but the "Codicil" does in fact appear elsewhere in the book, folded into an essay on George Oppen (*Blue* 198–99).

6. Words and syllables are units of natural language, of course, as letters are units of the system of writing, but in the system of poetic segmentation these can all acquire special supplementary values as units of *poetry,* above and beyond their functions as linguistic units.

7. Shoptaw defines a poem's measure as "its smallest unit of resistance to meaning" (212).

(DuPlessis, "Codicil" 51), complex interplays among segments of different kinds or scales. They also interact with the units of narrative organization, sometimes reinforcing or amplifying them—such as when verse lines parallel narrative units in Middle English saints' legends and romances—sometimes counterpointing or countermeasuring them, as in the case of Chaucer's handling of *rime royal.*

But surely it is not sufficient simply to tack an account of segmentivity onto the hypothesis of natural narrative in order to accommodate the special case of narrative poetry. To do so would be to risk treating the poetry in narrative poetry as merely *supplementary* to narrative, a little *extra* organization to enhance or complicate the narrative structure of a text. In such a framework, natural narrative still remains the baseline relative to which all divergences are gauged, and narrativization proceeds with poetry just as it would in the case of any other more or less resistant text. But the decision to narrate in verse has more radical consequences than that, surely. "To take a language and organize it in rhymed stanzas," writes Veronica Forrest-Thomson, "making use of a rhetorical tone and figurative combinations of words, is a social act which emphasizes formal features normally 'irrelevant' to the business of communication and, by adding this new dimension, comes to dominate the whole problem of producing meaning, or ordering" (60). Artifice changes everything, narrative included.

Artifice and naturalness have sustained a kind of dialectical tension right across the history of poetry. Certain periods, schools, and genres attach particular value to highly artificial devices and practices: complex meter and rhyme, special diction, densely figurative language, mythological subjects, literary allusion, distinctively poetic devices such as apostrophe,[8] and so on. Conversely, other periods, schools, and genres value relative naturalness, or at least the appearance of it: muted meter and rhyme, or their absence; prosaic or colloquial diction; downplayed figures; subjects drawn from everyday

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Measure determines where gaps open up in a poetic text, and a gap is always a provocation to gap-filling and meaning-making: where the poem resists, the reader engages. Poetry can be *word-measured,* as it is, for instance, in certain modernist one-word-per-line poems (William Carlos Williams, e.e. cummings); it can be measured at the scale of the *phrase* (Emily Dickinson); it can be measured at the scale of the *line,* as is the case in most lyric poetry; it can be measured at the level of the *sentence,* as in prose-poetry or in the Language poets' practice of the "New Sentence" (239–51); and it can be measured at the level of the *section,* as in sonnet cycles or in sequences such as *The Waste Land* (251–55). Poetry is not only measured, but is typically *countermeasured,* so that spacing at one level or scale is played off against spacing at another level or scale: line against sentence, as in enjambed blank verse; phrase against line and stanza, as in Dickinson's poems; and so on.

8. On apostrophe's function as a distinguishing mark of lyric poetry, see Culler's classic essay.

life; and so on. The history of poetry is in part the history of one generation's reaction against the perceived artificiality of its predecessor, in the name of greater naturalness (e.g., the Neoclassicists' reaction against the artificiality of baroque poetics, the Romantics' reaction against the artificiality of Neoclassicism, the Imagists' reaction against the artificiality of late-Romantic poetry) or sometimes the other way around, a reaction against the inartfulness of one's predecessors in the name of greater artifice (e.g., the Renaissance poets' reaction against their late-medieval predecessors). Particularly since the Romantic revolution at the turn of the eighteenth century, much effort has gone into naturalizing the artifices of poetry, in the sense of avoiding certain irredeemably artificial features (conventional periphrastic diction, for instance) and developing psychological, functional, and organic motivations for others.[9] It is in this naturalizing spirit, for instance, that Wordsworth could defend poetry as a natural medium of expression—"a selection of the language really used by men," as he called it in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*—or that Keats could assert in a letter that poetry ought to "come as naturally as the leaves to a tree" if it was to come at all.

Both tendencies, toward artifice and toward naturalness, or naturalization, persist into the twentieth century and beyond. By the end of the century, the dominant mode of poetry (at least in the English-speaking world) was colloquial, anecdotal, unmetered and unrhymed, differentiated from prose by little more than lineation—poetry of minimal artifice and maximum naturalness. The alternative tendency is reflected in the historical avant-gardes and their successors, movements that value poetry for its power to *resist* the natural—to defamiliarize, to estrange, to alienate, to dis-illusion. Insofar as the dominant naturalizing mode articulates or implies something like a theory of poetry, it is unlikely to be one that addresses poetry's artifice. So if we are seeking a theory that captures what the hypothesis of natural narrative leaves out—namely the *poetry* in narrative poetry, its artifice as opposed to its naturalness—we would do better to turn to the alternative tradition, that of the historical avant-gardes.

2.

A late and particularly uncompromising restatement of the avant-garde attitude is that of Veronica Forrest-Thomson in *Poetic Artifice* (1978).[10] Though

9. I am relying here on Wesling (1980), mainly as filtered through Charles Bernstein's discussion ("Artifice" 42–46).

10. I have written about Forrest-Thomson's theory of artifice on several occasions, including McHale, "Making." See also Bernstein, whose response to Forrest-Thomson I discuss below, and Mark.

the book's subtitle specifies that hers is *A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry,* in fact Forrest-Thomson proposes a theory of poetry in general, as distinct from all other modes of discourse. Her argument runs like this: Poetry has no other medium than language, which is also, and primarily, the medium of our day-to-day pragmatic engagement with the world, used in everyday language-games including, for instance, spontaneous conversational narrative. Poetry's nature and function, however, is to *dis*connect language from everyday contexts, dislocating it into the special context of poetry, de- and then recontextualizing it. Forrest-Thomson quotes with approval Wittgenstein's dictum: "Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information" (Forrest-Thomson x, quoting Wittgenstein 160). Poetry, Forrest-Thomson writes, "assimilate[s] the already-known and subject[s] it to a reworking which suspends and questions its categories, provides alternative orderings" (53). "Ordinary language," she continues, "provides poet and reader with a controlled and interpreted experiential context, while poetic convention disrupts, modifies, and perhaps questions" (56–57). It also synthesizes and integrates, imposing a new order of meaning on elements that in ordinary contexts of language-use would pass unnoticed or would be dismissed as just so much irrelevant noise. To contextualize language as poetry is to mobilize a set of conventions bearing on these "non-semantic" patterns—rhymes and other sound patterns, rhythms and repetitions, potential puns and other ambiguities, irrelevant associations. In the special context of poetry, with its special conventions, such nonsemantic patterns are foregrounded, elevated above the threshold of relevance, and semanticized, rendered meaningful.

Poetry, then, in Forrest-Thomson's view, is an essentially *artificial* discourse, distinct from natural conversational narrative or other genres of everyday discourse, and constitutionally resistant to naturalization.[11] Any poem that invites or courts naturalization (as many do, of course) compromises the very nature of poetry and undermines its special claim to our attention; such poetry is complicit with what Forrest-Thomson calls "bad naturalization." Interpreters of poetry inevitably naturalize, but *good* naturalization involves taking into account the primacy of the context of poetry itself—its artifice (36). "The worst disservice criticism can do poetry," she writes,

11. Fludernik's notion of narrativization (e.g., naturalizing a text by assimilating it to the model of natural narrative) is akin to Forrest-Thomson's naturalization—literally. Forrest-Thomson developed her concept of naturalization in concert with Jonathan Culler, to whom she was married for a time, and Fludernik explicitly credits Culler as the source of her own understanding of naturalization (31–35). See note 7.

is to try to understand it too soon, for this devalues the importance of real innovation which must take place on the non-semantic levels. Criticism's function is eventually to try to understand, at a late stage, even Artifice. (161)

Charles Bernstein, poet and theorist, and like Forrest-Thomson an heir of the avant-garde tradition, concurs: poetry "by nature emphasiz[es] its artifice" ("Artifice" 31). Revisiting Forrest-Thomson's theory of poetic artifice, and picking up on her metaphors of *absorption, assimilation, suspension,* and *hesitation,* Bernstein in his essay-poem *Artifice of Absorption* (1987, 1992) distinguishes between absorption in poetry and its opposite, antiabsorption. Absorptive poetry integrates, reconciles, and homogenizes its constitutive elements, including ordinary language; it naturalizes those elements, perhaps in the immigration-control sense of granting them citizenship in the poem, even though they originate elsewhere, outside. Absorptive poetry also absorbs in the sense of engaging and fascinating its readers, absorbing their attention. By contrast, antiabsorptive poetry, like the poetic artifice that Forrest-Thomson championed, resists integration, naturalization, and readerly fascination. "Poetry," Bernstein writes in one of his poems, "The Klupzy Girl" (*Islets* 47), "is like a swoon, with this difference: / It brings you to your senses." Or it does so at one level, at least; for, in Bernstein's account, poetry that is antiabsorptive at one level can nevertheless be absorptive—hypnotic, enchanting, entrancing, swoony—when we pull back to view it from another, higher level. Conversely, poetry that is absorptive, and *absorbing,* at one level can be antiabsorptive—off-putting, repulsive, alienating—at another. Moreover, the very same devices and features can be either absorptive or antiabsorptive, depending on context. Metrical versification, for instance, has typically been used for absorptive purposes, "the regular recurrences of sounds / & beats lulling—or pulling—the attention / inward" ("Artifice" 39). "Conversely," however,

> metricality & other
> traditional prosodic devices, especially
> when foregrounded, can be potent antiabsorptive
> techniques (& were traditionally used as such
> by many English poets prior to the rise of
> Romanticism). A sestina, in almost anybody's
> hands, seems artificial. ("Artifice" 39)

Neither Forrest-Thomson nor Bernstein explicitly addresses narrative

poetry in connection with their theories of artifice and absorption.[12] Bernstein, in particular, seems suspicious of narrative, apparently regarding it as inherently absorptive—a view shared by many others in the avant-garde tradition. "Today's / bestsellers routinely 'spellbind,'" he observes ("Artifice" 53)— that is, they absorb us in the sense of immersing us so that, while reading a bestseller, we may lose track of the world around us. "'Escapist' literature," Bernstein writes, "offers no escape, / narratively reinforcing our captivity" (75), and he quotes approvingly from a poem by his colleague Bob Perelman: "If only the plot would leave people alone" (84, quoting Perelman 63). Nevertheless, there is no reason why the conceptual tools of artifice and absorption should not yield valuable insights when applied to poems that tell stories. Natural narrative is presumably absorptive: that is, it seeks to efface the traces of its fabrication (its artifice) and to immerse us readers in its storyworld, to engage and spellbind us. Its language is that of everyday life, the language used to play the language-game of communication, not the artificial language of what Forrest-Thomson sometimes calls, provocatively, the "Separate Planet" of poetry (87, 100). But what happens when the absorptiveness that is native to narrative is mediated by poetic artifice—by poetry's artificial apparatus of meter, line- and stanza-breaks, end-rhyme, musical effects, conspicuous figures, and so on?

One could begin exploring the relation between artifice, absorption, and narrative in narrative poetry by examining cases from the extreme poles of artificiality and naturalness. All poems, writes Bernstein, "require artifice," but some (the absorptive ones) hide it while others (the antiabsorptive ones) flaunt it ("Artifice" 30):

>   If the artifice
> is recessed, the resulting textual transparency
> yields an apparent, if misleading, content.
> . . . . If the artifice is
> foregrounded, there's a tendency to say that there
> is no content or meaning, as if the poem were a
> formal or decorative exercise concerned only with
> representing its own mechanisms. (10)

At the pole of extreme artifice, where poems sometimes appear to be merely "formal or decorative exercise[s]," we find, for instance, verse romances of

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12. Interestingly, Forrest-Thomson analyzes several quasi-narrative poems, including Eliot's *The Waste Land* and his quatrain poems, as well as J. H. Prynne's "Of Sanguine Fire," but she finds virtually nothing to say about their narrativity.

the English Renaissance, highly wrought poems on mythological topics, obviously designed to showcase the poets' ingenuity, linguistic facility, and mastery of poetic convention, but not always very seriously committed to their own narrative content, which sometimes appears as little more than a pretext for poetic exhibitionism. Examples include Thomas Lodge's *Scylla's Metamorphosis* (1589), Samuel Daniel's *The Complaint of Rosamond* (1592), Michael Drayton's *Endymion and Phoebe* (1592), Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (1598), and the most accomplished of them all, the poem that I will consider in the next section, Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593). How do verse-form, musicality, figuration, and other artificial features interact with the units and categories of narrative organization (events and agency, storyworld, characterization, focalization, narration, etc.) and the sources of narrative interest (curiosity, suspense, surprise) in such conspicuously artificial narrative poems?

At the other extreme, we might consider a twentieth-century verse novel such as Les Murray's *Fredy Neptune* (1998), a deliberately prosaic book-length poem that tells an eventful (literally *event-filled*) story in a highly novelistic manner. An Australian, Murray clearly subscribes here and elsewhere in his poetry to the dominant late-century poetics of colloquial diction and muted artifice. However, as Bernstein reminds us, muted or recessed artifice is not the same as absence of artifice. To see what difference even minimal artifice makes, in section 4 I will try the experiment of recasting a passage from *Fredy Neptune* (which is written in unmetered, generally unrhymed eight-line stanzas) as continuous prose, *de-versifying* it and juxtaposing my fabricated prose version with Murray's original. When one restores the poem's segmentivity, what happens to the organization of its narration and its storyworld? Does artifice (even the minimal artifice of line- and stanza-breaks) really change everything, or not?

3.

Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*[13] is a narrative poem in 199 six-line, end-rhymed stanzas, iambic pentameter in meter, and rhyming in the pattern *ababcc.* It retells a story familiar from Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* Book X, which had already been retold multiple times by Shakespeare's Renaissance predecessors, including Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* Book III, canto 1, stanzas

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13. I am using the text in Reese (112–58) because of its convenient proximity to five other verse romances of the era, by Daniel, Lodge, Marlowe, Drayton, and Marston.

34–38. Spenser's version takes the form of ekphrases of tapestries hanging on the walls of Castle Joyous. Here the sequence of events is parceled into several quasi-lyric moments, most of them occupying their own stanzas in a way that anticipates the distribution of narrative events across panels in comics: the goddess Venus is smitten by love for the mortal Adonis; she seduces him; she gazes upon him as he sleeps; she cautions him against hunting; Adonis lies dead, gored by a boar, and Venus mourns him, whereupon he is transformed into a flower. Shakespeare's story differs from Spenser's in that his Adonis never succumbs to Venus, and her love for him remains unconsummated. However, Shakespeare's version preserves the narrative gap corresponding to Adonis's actual goring, which in his version as in Spenser's occurs offstage, literally between stanzas (in the gutter, to pursue the comics analogy). In narratological terms, one could say that events in Shakespeare's version are focalized through Venus and that, when Adonis parts from her to go hunting and gets himself killed, the perspective remains with her, so that we see and hear only what she does.

The principal differences between the Shakespearean version and Spenser's, however, arise in the areas of scale—sheer length—and consequently of narrative pacing. Spenser retells the Venus and Adonis story in the space of five nine-line stanzas, for a total of 45 lines, while Shakespeare's poem runs to no fewer than 1,194 lines. Shakespeare dilates at length upon the events of the story, digressing often, prolonging each event and thereby delaying the later ones in the sequence. His is a poem of suspended action and prolonged anticipation, a dilatory poem, much more leisurely in pace than Spenser's version. Here is where artifice has the most forceful impact on narrative. While Spencer's poem is certainly highly artificial, in Shakespeare's, artifice serves to slow narrative almost to a standstill: artifice changes everything.

The building blocks of Shakespeare's narrative—or perhaps we should say its *stumbling* blocks, since they impede the narrative as much as they advance it—are its formal units: its stanzas. Here it might be helpful to consider the *affordances* of this particular stanzaic form, its potential for use.[14] Every verseform, stanzaic or otherwise, offers different affordances, different potentials for use, encouraging or discouraging different interactions with (in the case of narrative poems) narrative segmentation. Narrative may follow the line of least resistance, conforming to the stanzaic structure, or conversely it may ignore the promptings or resistances of form. It is always free to *override* the stanzaic structure, as Chaucer's narrative, for instance, sometimes does the

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14. The concept of affordances is borrowed from software designers and media theorists, and ultimately from perceptual psychology; for an earlier attempt to apply it to stanzaic form, see McHale "Affordances."

rime royal stanza-form in Fludernik's example from *Troilus and Criseyde*. The affordances of form are only options, not mandates, but they are options that yield certain advantages that the poet may choose to seize—or not.

In the case of the *ababcc* stanza of *Venus and Adonis*,[15] lineation and stanza form are conducive to strong segmentation into compact, integral units, an affordance that Shakespeare normally observes throughout. There is little line-to-line enjambment of syntactical or narrative units, and almost none from stanza to stanza except in a couple of conspicuously anomalous passages (about which I will have more to say below). Strong mid-line caesura is rare, which makes the one stanza in which it is foregrounded an exception that proves the rule:

> 120
> 'Where did I leave?' 'No matter where (quoth he);
> Leave me, and then the story aptly ends,
> The night is spent.' 'Why, what of that?' (quoth she).
> 'I am (quoth he) expected of my friends;
>   And now 'tis dark, and going I shall fall.'
>   'In night (quoth she) desire sees best of all. (Reese 139)

Here, exceptionally for this poem, five dialogue turns have been collapsed into a single stanza, two of them beginning at mid-line (the caesura) and running over the line-end, foregrounding the romantic-comedy aspects of the situation, and ironically deflating Venus's seductive eloquence ("Where did I leave [off]?," i.e., "Now, where was I?").

The end-rhyme pattern organizes each stanza into two units: a quatrain (*abab*) followed by a couplet (*cc*). Shakespeare exploits the affordances of this stanza's form throughout, frequently realizing the potential for a "turn" after line 4. For instance, on at least four occasions he makes the stanza a vehicle for extended similes, with the comparison occupying the quatrain and the object being compared, the couplet:

> 10
> *Even as* an empty eagle, sharp by fast,
> Tires with her beak on feather, flesh, and bone,
> Shaking her wings, devouring all in haste,
> Till either gorge be stuff'd, or prey be gone;

15. This stanza form had been used before, in Sidney's *Arcadia* and Spenser's *Astrophel* and the First Eclogue of *The Shepherds Calendar,* but most relevantly in Lodge's *Scylla's Metamorphosis,* one of the poems that launched the fashion for Ovidian verse romances.

> *Even so* she kiss'd his brow, his cheek, his chin,
> And where she ends, she doth anew begin. (Reese 114; my italics,
>   B.M.)

Simile, one might say, is a figure of dilation, as opposed to metaphor, generally a figure of compression. No surprise, then, that *Venus and Adonis,* a poem of dilation, abounds in similes, including stanza-length ones.[16]

  Despite its length, *Venus and Adonis* really comprises only two episodes, or better, two cycles of delay. The first, occupying something like two-thirds of the poem (stanzas 1–135), involves erotic delay—in effect, elaborate foreplay: Adonis resists Venus's seduction. After a narrative pause of some ten stanzas, the action, such as it is, resumes: Venus delays confronting the fact of Adonis's death (stanzas 145–76); she *stalls for time.*[17] While the poetics of delay is characteristic of English Renaissance verse romances,[18] Shakespeare outdoes his

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16. See also stanzas 49, 155, 173. Lodge in *Scylla's Metamorphosis* exploits the affordances of this same quatrain-plus-couplet form less than does Shakespeare. There appears to be only one stanza-length simile in Lodge's poem, and if anything, Lodge counterpoints his syntactic and narrative units *against* the rhyme-scheme, with many of his stanzas dividing counterintuitively into two three-line units (rhyming *aba bcc*). *Rime royal,* a related stanza-form, but seven lines long instead of six (rhyming *ababbcc*), would appear to offer similar opportunities for organizing stanza-length similes. Yet Shakespeare himself, in his other narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), only rarely exploits the *rime royal* stanza as the vehicle for similes.

17. The structure of Shakespeare's other narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece,* parallels that of *Venus and Adonis.* It, too, has two anticipated climaxes, the first erotic (the rape), the second mortal (Lucrece's suicide), each delayed by the accumulation of artificial devices. Tarquin's rape of Lucrece—which, despite the gravity of this poem's tone, nevertheless excites a certain amount of prurient anticipation—is delayed first by Tarquin's lengthy self-address (stanzas 41–60), then by a highly figurative *blason* of Lucrece's sleeping body (stanzas 56–61), then by Lucrece's attempts at dissuasion (stanzas 82–96). Lucrece's suicide is delayed by Lucrece's wait for her letter to be delivered to her husband Collatine and for the latter to arrive. This narrative pause is filled in part by an elaborately artificial ekphrasis of a tapestry illustrating the fall of Troy (stanzas 196–209), and by Lucrece's commentary on it (stanzas 210–26). Finally, the suicide is delayed by Lucrece's retelling of her rape (stanzas 233–37), which is strictly speaking redundant: we have already seen it all.

18. Already as early as Lodge's *Scylla,* both the poet himself and his character narrator Glaucus display considerable self-consciousness and anxiety about delay in their respective narratives. Marlowe, in *Hero and Leander,* interpolates narrative episodes involving misdirected, inappropriate, or perverse sexuality in order to delay heteronormative consummation between his protagonists, while in his continuation of Marlowe's unfinished poem, George Chapman frankly acknowledges that he has interpolated irrelevant digressions in order to put off the painful duty of narrating the deaths of Hero and Leander. Michael Drayton's *Endymion and Phoebe* programmatically resists the delayed-consummation structure of other Ovidian verse romances (such as *Hero and Leander* and *Venus and Adonis*) because, since Phoebe's love for Endymion is strictly chaste, there is no erotic consummation to anticipate. Thus Drayton's elaborate descriptive pauses, digressions, insets, and so forth, are literally "pointless," not serving to delay or prolong *anything,* there being no climactic event to delay or prolong. Conversely, in John Marston's

predecessors and contemporaries in his deployment of the resources of artifice to *suspend* and *impede* forward motion.[19]

"The sexual analogy / seems inescapable," writes Bernstein in connection with the poetics of antiabsorption:

> an interruptiveness
> that intensifies & prolongs desire, a postponement
> that finds in delay a more sustaining pleasure &
> presence. That is, an erotics of reading &
> writing. . . . ("Artifice" 72)

It is just such an "interruptiveness" that characterizes the first cycle of *Venus and Adonis.* Everything that Venus does to seduce Adonis only defers consummation: herein lies the structural irony of this part of the poem, and the source of its unrelieved erotic tension. Venus's elaborate argumentation, playing seemingly endless variations on the theme of *carpe diem,* fills up many stanzas and only prolongs our wait for an erotic climax that finally never arrives. For instance, the minor episode of Adonis's horse breaking loose and taking advantage of its erotic opportunities (stanzas 44–54) is interpreted by Venus (stanza 66) as yet another emblem of seizing the day, but in fact both the episode itself and Venus's interpretation—amounting to a redundant retelling of events we have already been shown—are digressive, serving only to sidetrack Venus's campaign of seduction. The emblem of *carpe diem* is subverted, becoming a figure of withholding and delay. Moreover, the poem is self-conscious about its own delaying tactics, reflecting ironically at one point that "swelling passion doth provoke a pause" (stanza 37; Reese 120), and later that lovers' "copious stories, oftentimes begun / End without audience and are never done" (stanza 141; Reese 144).

In the second cycle, the narrative stages and embodies Venus's reluctance to confront the fact of Adonis's death. The delaying tactics become increasingly artificial, in Forrest-Thompson's and Bernstein's sense of the term, the closer she (and the narrative) comes to the ineluctable evidence of Adonis's death: his violated body. Initially, evidence of the hunt reaches Venus only as the distant sound of hounds (stanzas 145–49), but immediately thereafter

parodic *Metamorphosis of Pygmalion's Image* (1598), despite some gestures toward the delaying tactics of Lodge, Shakespeare, and others, there is virtually no delay between desire and consummation: Pygmalion lusts after the statue he has created (stanzas 1–22), petitions Venus to transform her into a real woman (23–24), and goes to bed with her (25–27), whereupon she is transformed and he enjoys her sexually (28–39).

19. Forrest-Thomson's terminology (*suspension, hesitation,* etc.) is highly appropriate here, but so is the related Russian formalist concept of *impeded form* (see, e.g., Shklovsky 22–42).

she confronts the boar itself, whose bloodied tusks are an index of Adonis's death (stanzas 150–51).[20] Despite the decisiveness of this evidence, the following twenty-five stanzas serve to prolong Venus's evasion of the truth. Events begin to ramify and multiply, and redundancies pile up. Venus's own indecision and indirection mirror the indirections and sidetracks of the narrative: "this way she runs, and now she will no further, / But back retires" (stanza 151; Reese 147); "She treads the path that she untreads again; / Her more than haste is mated with delay" (stanza 152; ibid.). She confronts not one of Adonis's hounds, but one after another, redundantly ("And here she meets another . . . Another, and another," stanzas 153–54; ibid.). Self-divided, Venus herself disintegrates into multiple component parts, semiautonomous "sub-Venuses" with which she must negotiate. Thus she tells her senses to "leave quaking, bids them fear no more" (stanza 151; ibid.), while "A thousand spleens bear her a thousand ways" (stanza 152; ibid.). All of this *takes time,* and takes up space in the poem, deferring the inevitable.

Artificial devices accumulate, including at least one stanza-length simile ("Look how the world's people are amaz'd / At apparitions. . . . / So she at these sad signs. . . . ," stanza 155; Reese 148). Venus apostrophizes Death (stanzas 156–99), and is in turn herself apostrophized by the poet (stanza 165). Then she apostrophizes Death all over again (stanzas 167–69), reversing herself and taking back everything she had said the first time: "Now she unweaves the web that she hath wrought" (stanza 166; Reese 150). Tellingly self-reflective, this metaphor obviously alludes to Penelope's nightly unweaving of the fabric she had woven during the day—the *locus classicus* of calculated delay.

The final delay, which stops the action dead in its tracks, occurs at the very moment that Venus "spies" Adonis's shattered body, in a sequence of five exceptionally dense stanzas, 172–76 (lines 1027–56):

172
As falcon to the lure, away she flies;
The grass stoops not, she treads on it so light;
And in her haste unfortunately spies
The foul boar's conquest on her fair delight;
    Which seen, her eyes, as murder'd with the view,
    Like stars asham'd of day, themselves withdrew:

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20. The overrunning of the stanza-break between stanzas 150 and 151, the first time this happens in the poem, signals the special status of the boar, named at the very end of stanza 150 (where it rhymes ironically with *fear no more*) but caught up in a sentence that rushes on into the next stanza ("Whose frothy mouth, bepainted all with red" etc.).

173

Or, as the snail, whose tender horns being hit,
Shrinks backwards in his shelly cave with pain,
And there, all smother'd up, in shade doth sit,
Long after fearing to creep forth again;
  So, at his bloody view, her eyes are fled
  Into the deep dark cabins of her head:

174

Where they resign their office and their light
To the disposing of her troubled brain;
Who bids them still consort with ugly night,
And never wound the heart with looks again;
  Who, like a king perplexed in his throne,
  By their suggestion gives a deadly groan,

175

Whereat each tributary subject quakes;
As when the wind, imprison'd in the ground,
Struggling for passage, earth's foundation shakes,
Which with cold terror doth men's minds confound.
  This mutiny each part doth so surprise
  That from their dark beds once more leap her eyes;

176

And, being open'd, threw unwilling light
Upon the wide wound that the boar had trench'd
In his soft flank; whose wonted lily white
With purple tears, that his wound wept, was drench'd:
  No flower was nigh, no grass, herb, leaf, or weed,
  But stole his blood and seem'd with him to bleed. (Reese 151–52)

Stanza-breaks are overrun—countermeasured, in Shoptaw's terms—so that the five stanzas form one continuous syntactic and narrative block, yet the effect is not (as might be expected) one of breathless, onrushing haste, but rather of conceptual complication, daunting intricacy, and deferral. Having registered the (as yet unspecified) evidence of the boar's violence, Venus's eyes "withdraw" (stanza 172). As they had earlier, her parts begin acting independently of her, and of each other—eyes, brain, heart; the stanzas *anatomize*

Venus, another highly artificial delaying tactic, parodying the conventional erotic *blason* of the beloved's body.

As in a conventional *blason,* each body part is figured as something else, or indeed as *several* somethings else. Thus Venus's eyes withdraw "Like stars asham'd of day" (stanza 172), but then this simile is further dilated by an alternative simile, expanding to fill a stanza: "Or as the snail, whose tender horns being hit, / Shrinks backward" etc. (stanza 175). Her eyes resign authority to her brain, which tries to protect her heart (stanza 174), which is itself compared to a "perplexed" king. The king's "groans," in turn, are compared to an earthquake, as the similes pile up, one on top of another: heart likened to a king, king likened to an earthquake (stanza 174–75). Finally, the discourse circles back to its starting point, Venus's eyes, and the story, having stalled out for the course of five stanzas, resumes, along with Venus's consciousness, as she finally acknowledges seeing Adonis's corpse and his shed blood (stanza 176).

This is not the last of the delays, for even after this acknowledgment, Venus remains reluctant to accept the truth, and the narrative continues to embody her reluctance in its own dilatoriness. But the roundabout, dilatory progress toward the climactic revelation of Adonis's death tells us everything we need to know about the operations of artifice in this poem. The devices of artifice— similes and apostrophes and so on, but also the fundamental segmentivity that makes the poem a poem in the first place—have a drastic impact on the pacing of the narrative; but more than that, they upend the usual hierarchical relationship between discourse and story. Discourse here is not the handmaiden of story, but *dominates* story; story—narrative content—recedes into the background, while the artifices of poetry make a spectacle of themselves, exhibiting themselves for our inspection and delectation. The *poetry* in this narrative poem upstages the *narrative.*

4.

Les Murray's *Fredy Neptune,* a verse novel from the very end of the twentieth century, is the fictional autobiography of one Fred Boettcher, a working-class Australian of German parentage who wanders the world in the years from the Great War through the Second World War, sometimes as a merchant sailor, sometimes as a circus strongman, sometimes on one side of the century's murderous conflicts, sometimes on the other. Over 250 pages long and divided into five books of unequal length, it straddles multiple genres, combining elements of picaresque, proletarian fiction, historical fiction (or its postmodern-

ist variant, historiographic metafiction), and magical realism. The novel even flirts with allegory—Fred witnesses a Turkish atrocity against Armenian civilians and, apparently as a consequence, loses his ability to experience either pain or pleasure—turning him into something like a realized metaphor for the historical traumas of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, there is enough ambiguity about the nature of Fred's strange disability (is it psychosomatic? the result of a leprosylike nerve disease?) that the novel stops short of toppling headlong into the fantastic or allegorical modes, remaining basically realistic.

In short, *Fredy Neptune* has closer affinities with prose fictions such as John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* (1930–36), Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964), or Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959) than it does with verse novels in the tradition of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1831), Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69), Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body* (1928), or Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons* (1953, 1979).[21] Nevertheless, it *is* a poem, albeit one in the low-key, colloquial, minimally artificial style of late-century mainstream verse. It is composed in stanzas of eight free-verse lines, each varying from ten to fifteen syllables in length, generally unrhymed, though fugitive end-rhymes appear here and there, irregularly and opportunistically, as it were. In other words, *Fredy Neptune* does display forms of segmentation that are distinctive of poetry—lineation, stanza-breaks—but little more than that, and even such segmentivity as it possesses is minimal and muted.

Indeed, so unemphatic is this poem's artifice that one might find oneself wondering—as one never would in the case of flagrantly artificial poems such as *Venus and Adonis*—exactly what difference verse makes here, if any. There's one way to find out: by reformatting a brief passage of *Fredy Neptune* as prose, and then comparing this ersatz prose version with Murray's verse original to see how (if at all) verse segmentation influences narrative. I am proposing, in other words, to restage experimentally and *ad hoc* the process of *dérimage* or de-versification (see Kittay and Godzich) that Western vernacular literatures underwent in the Middle Ages, when verse narratives, hitherto the dominant narrative form, were recast as prose, launching the vernacular tradition of prose narrative.[22]

21. Other recent verse novels include novelized epics such as John Gardner's *Jason and Medeia* (1973), Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990), and Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* (1998), as well as a surprising number of genre fictions in verse, such as John Hollander's *Reflections on Espionage* (1976), a spy novel in verse; Frederick Turner's *The New World* (1985), a science fiction in verse; James Cummins's *The Whole Truth* (1986) and Kevin Young's *Black Maria* (2005), detective novels in verse; Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986), a soap opera in verse; and Michael Ondaatje's *Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), a Western in mixed verse and prose. For details, see McHale "Telling."

22. This experiment might be seen as the mirror image of one performed by Forrest-

Let's sample a brief but eventful passage from early in the novel, less than halfway through Book I, "The Middle Sea" (16–17). Fred has been stranded in Egypt during the Great War, and lands a civilian job breaking horses for the British army in Cairo. Together with some fellow Australians, he follows the army to Jerusalem, recently captured from the Turks. He rides out one morning with his mates just as the Turks mount a counterattack. Recast as prose, the passage reads like this (I have somewhat arbitrarily inserted paragraphing to enhance the prose "look" of the passage):

Next morning after a drink of tea at daybreak our Cairo party rode off south. Bill Hines, Yall Sherritt, Poley Corrigan, myself and the Indian Army man Loocher Sibley. We were talking dogs, the ones who caught us out at cricket, the dingo that let Yall pet her, the curs Poley kept to lick his rheumatics better—we heard like whips cracking, and more and more, back past the windmill, out north of the city. Chains of sparks dotted off a far hill. *Machine gun,* cried Sibley. *And bundooks, lots of them. Dekho that!* a red star went smoking up the sky from the gully Jehosophat. *Jacko's rode down from Nablus to take Jerusalem back.* Stones kicked. You sensed sizzles in the air. Somewhere went pingg! Poley's face turned white: he reached around—*Bloody thing*—and picked a spent bullet out of his tunic like a bee-sting. *You're getting as tough as Freddy, and he's a stature,* said someone. We should have cleared out, but we stared at the war.

So this was battle. Going on, I kept turning round; battle was strings of riders hell-for-leather in a smoky wall of sound. There I saw my first aeroplanes. Three came straining over from down south, rocking, hanging their pony-trap wheels. In front of those north hills they stopped and braced above ground on their guns' fumy pencillings. Bigger guns right near poking out through riveted shields would shorten, and your ear hurt, round a king gap, then you'd hear the slung case rebound.

My life, keeping out of the human race to stay in it—I'd have to think back, to separate thoughts that were all one poem, like, at the brink of what was to happen. There were no sides for me: both were mine. I'd seen them both. Better to lie than pick one: better die than pick: and I'd died indeed flesh-dead, alive in no-life. Not in civvy, not in air, maybe in fire. Would I re-light there? Feel, feel if only death?

Thomson (22–24) and Culler (*Structuralist* 188–92), where they rewrite samples of banal journalistic prose as verse to expose the reading conventions of poetry. Compare also Fish's later (322–37) but more notorious experiment of asking students to interpret a "found" list of names as a poem.

> I spurred to a bolt, gravel scattering, back north on my waler—Blue steep up white rubble, blotch and blotch went bursts in the sky; harnessed guns, turbaned Indians, Light Horse all yelling Ayy! men in rage, in their guts, men dead with sheep, butcher's parcels of floury khaki, near dropped rifles, jump-down terrace walls and straight lines whippy round me everywhere. My poor horse stopped one, stopped another one. I spilled off him, left him dying, ran in behind a stacked wall that was spitting and crying. A man, a young officer, was kneeling there. Politely he put down his telephone.

Whatever artificial features this passage possessed in the original have been obscured or submerged, barring a few insistent rhymes, perhaps: *pingg/thing/sting* in the first paragraph, *dying/crying* in the last, maybe a few others. Metaphorical figures throughout are colloquial and unemphatic—gunfire is like *whips cracking* and *chains of sparks,* an extracted bullet is *like a bee-sting,* and so forth—with only a few foregrounded exceptions: the *pony-trap wheels* of the aeroplanes, their guns' *pencillings* on the hillside, fallen soldiers like *butcher's parcels of floury khaki,* and so on.

"Natural" narrative features emerge strongly, none more so than Fred's narrative voice. His style is colloquial Australian (e.g., a *waler* is an Australian breed of horse), with inset direct quotations from other speakers, especially Loocher Sibley, whose exotic diction (*bundooks, Dekho that!*) explicitly marks him as an "Indian Army man."[23] Fred is narrating his own experience retrospectively, a temporal perspective signaled by the shift to the time of narration in the third paragraph, where Fred reflects in the present about his choices at that past moment of battlefield crisis. All of these features are readily assimilated to the model of natural conversational narrative, which this passage simulates.

Other features, while still "natural" in this sense, clearly derive from the poetics of the novel, especially the realist and modernist novel. The narrative pace shifts from summary to scene in the middle of the first paragraph, as indirect speech report ("We were talking," etc.) gives way to direct discourse, and events begin crowding in thick and fast as the battlefield action heats up. Singulative events ("There I saw my first aeroplanes") alternate with iterative ones ("battle was strings of riders," "Bigger guns . . . would shorten"), creating the characteristic texture of realist narrative. More characteristic of modernism is the impressionism of the battle scene, especially in the last paragraph,

23. "Someone," presumably not Sibley but one of the Australians, pronounces *statue* as *stature.*

where lists of fragmentary images (synecdoches) reflect the speed and confusion of battle as experienced by Fred. The effect is cinematic, a series of shots edited together to produce a single complex impression. Similar in its effect is the delayed recognition of what is happening, mirroring the characters' subjective experience of disorientation and shock. Like Marlow in the wheelhouse of *Heart of Darkness,* when "sticks," only belated recognized as spears, begin rattling down on the deck around him (see Watt 317), here Fred and his mates only belatedly recognize "whips cracking" and "chains of sparks" as machine-gun fire, "sizzles in the air" as bullets, and so on. An interval of time elapses between perception and recognition—an interval mimed by the syntax of the passage.

Now compare the same passage as it actually appears in *Fredy Neptune,* organized into five eight-line stanzas:

> Next morning after a drink of tea at daybreak
> our Cairo party rode off south. Bill Hines, Yall Sherritt,
> Poley Corrigan, myself and the Indian Army man
> Loocher Sibley. We were talking dogs, the ones
> who caught us out at cricket, the dingo that let Yall pet her,
> the curs Poley kept to lick his rheumatics better—
> we heard like whips cracking, and more and more, back past the windmill,
> out north of the city. Chains of sparks dotted off a far hill.
>
> *Machine gun,* cried Sibley. *And bundooks, lots of them. Dekho that!*
> a red star went smoking up the sky from the gully Jehosophat.
> *Jacko's rode down from Nablus to take Jerusalem back.*
> Stones kicked. You sensed sizzles in the air. Somewhere went pingg!
> Poley's face turned white: he reached around—*Bloody thing—*
> and picked a spent bullet out of his tunic like a bee-sting.
> *You're getting as tough as Freddy, and he's a stature,*
> said someone. We should have cleared out, but we stared at the war.
>
> So this was battle. Going on, I kept turning round;
> battle was strings of riders hell-for-leather in a smoky wall of sound.
> There I saw my first aeroplanes. Three came straining over
> from down south, rocking, hanging their pony-trap wheels.
> In front of those north hills they stopped and braced above ground
> on their guns' fumy pencillings. Bigger guns right near
> poking out through riveted shields would shorten, and your ear
> hurt, round a king gap, then you'd hear the slung case rebound.

My life, keeping out of the human race to stay in it—
I'd have to think back, to separate thoughts that were all one
poem, like, at the brink of what was to happen.
There were no sides for me: both were mine. I'd seen them both.
Better to lie than pick one: better die than pick: and I'd died indeed
flesh-dead, alive in no-life. Not in civvy, not in air,
maybe in fire. Would I re-light there? Feel, feel if only death?
I spurred to a bolt, gravel scattering, back north on my waler—

Blue steep up white rubble, blotch and blotch went bursts in the sky;
harnessed guns, turbaned Indians, Light Horse all yelling Ayy!
men in rage, in their guts, men dead with sheep, butcher's parcels
of floury khaki, near dropped rifles, jump-down terrace walls
and straight lines whippy round me everywhere. My poor horse stopped
      one,
stopped another one. I spilled off him, left him dying, ran
in behind a stacked wall that was spitting and crying. A man,
a young officer, was kneeling there. Politely he put down his telephone.
(Murray 16–17)

As it happens, this is one of the passages in the novel where end-rhymes do occur, albeit irregularly. Strikingly, these were mainly rendered "inaudible" in the prose form—for instance, *pet her/better, that/Jehosophat, war/stature, parcels/walls, one/telephone*—confirming Forrest-Thomson's analysis of the irrelevance of nonsemantic elements in ordinary language, where they are eclipsed by content. Lineation thrusts these end-rhymes into plain view, making them audible and functional.[24]

In many instances, artificial segmentation converges with and corroborates or enhances narrative segmentation. For example, lines of directly quoted dialogue are each allotted separate verse lines, so that shifts in and out of quotation coincide with line-ends.[25] Similarly, the shift into Fred's narrative present coincides with a stanza-break. More tellingly, the effect of delayed recognition that I analyzed above in connection with the de-versified version is amplified by segmentation. A stanza-break intervenes between "chains of sparks"

24. Conversely, at least one rhyme that *was* audible even in the prose form—*dying/crying*—proves to be internal, not an end-rhyme, defeating our expectations, and creating an effect of counterpoint.

25. Moreover, the "young officer" who "politely . . . put[s] down his telephone" at the very end of this excerpt speaks at the beginning of the next stanza, so that the shift to his direct speech coincides with a stanza-break.

and "*Machine guns,*" keeping the characters (and the reader) in suspense for just a moment longer. A line-break intervenes between "*Bloody thing*" and "spent bullet," with a comparable effect. Moreover, delayed identification of the mysterious object is further foregrounded here by the end-rhymes, which all converge on the same *thing: pingg, bee-sting.* In short, artifice in this passage, minimal though it may be, serves the function of narrative delay, just as the much more flagrant artifice does in *Venus and Adonis.*[26]

However, not every instance of artificial segmentation functions in this way to reinforce and enhance narrative segmentation. In some instances, lineation and stanza organization are countermeasured *against* narrative segmentation, creating effects of counterpoint. In the first stanza, for instance, the listing of characters' eccentric proper names (which produces a strong "reality effect") and then of their topics of conversation (dogs they have known) trails across the line-breaks, enlivening and estranging these otherwise mundane catalogues through formal counterpoint. Similarly, in the fifth stanza, the catalogue of war impressions is counterpointed against line-breaks, amplifying the effect of disorientation and strangeness. Especially interesting is the handling of the shift of narrative level in stanza 4. As we have seen, the shift *into* Fred's narrative present coincides with a stanza-break, but the shift *back* to the narrated events does not. While it does coincide with a line-break, the return from the present of narration to the narrated past straddles the larger unit, indicated by the stanza-break, spilling over into the next stanza. Artificial segmentation here cuts across narrative units.

So, what difference *does* poetic artifice make in a poem such as *Fredy Neptune* where artifice is minimal, reduced to little more than lineation, stanza-breaks, and sporadic end-rhymes, by contrast with the heightened diction, extravagant figuration, and other special effects of a poem such as *Venus and Adonis*? For one thing, as we have seen, artificial segmentation functionalizes and semanticizes nonsemantic patterns, such as rhyme, that are irrelevant and even inaudible in unsegmented prose. For another, artificial segmentation sometimes coincides with narrative segmentation, enhancing and amplifying it—but not always. Sometimes, instead, it cuts across narrative segmentation, setting up counterrhythms, syncopating and counterpointing narrative shifts.

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26. Delay is even an object of reflection here, as it is in *Venus and Adonis.* The *king gap* at the end of the third stanza is presumably the hiatus in one's hearing when guns fire nearby, but can't it also be construed as referring self-reflexively to the gap between stanzas that immediately follows? No doubt this is an overly ingenious reading, but it can't be dismissed out of hand in light of the next stanza, where Fred steps back from the story to reflect on his life generally, and in particular on his thoughts at the moment of battle, "that were all one / poem, like." The self-reflective figure of one's life-story as a poem recurs throughout *Fredy Neptune;* see Murray 22, 44, 122, 128, 160, 176, 190, 253.

In any case, by introducing a series of minuscule gaps and interruptions, artificial segmentation jars us out of our automatic (natural) attitude toward this absorbing narrative. By roughening the texture of the narrative, it impedes automatic absorption. It counters the template of natural narrative with a competing template—if not exactly unnatural narrative, then at least artificial narrative, that is, poetry.

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