

*THE VIRTUOSO BY GRAHAM SWIFT: THE MAGIC OF EVERYDAY LIFE*

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*Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse Graham Swift's poem The Virtuoso in light of his theory regarding the magic of everyday life and in relation to his novels. According to Lindsay (2002), Swift's writings "raise questions about the relationship between personal histories and world events, between personal and public perceptions." Swift confesses that he starts his novels from small designs, that is, with poems he writes in-between his novels. What similarities can we find in terms of themes, characters, and philosophy of life and writing among his novels and this poem? In The Making of an Elephant: Writing from Within, Swift believes that "fiction – storytelling – is a magical thing." (Swift 2009: 11). He writes about "being under a story's 'spell'" (Swift 2009: 12), claiming that "the power of a good story is a primitive, irreducible mystery that answers to some need deep in human nature" (Swift 2009: 12). In what ways does Swift tell a story in this poem? Narratological theories will explain this.*

*Keywords: moments of vision, narratology, history, lyricism, fiction.*

Swift's poem *The Virtuoso* reflects the workings of memory in his novels. The poem deals with nostalgia, not, as we might expect, for the days of the virtuoso's glory, but for more ordinary days, "When he'd make his way/ To the Academy" (Swift 2009: 238). Like the majority of Swift's narrators, the narrator in this poem goes back to the past, recalls it and tries to reflect on it. What is more, there is a direct reference to the "magic" of an ordinary moment: "(why *this* morning, what/ Was magic about *this* morning?)/ Everything sang." (Swift 2009: 239).

All narrators in Swift's novels use free association in their examination of the past. "The associative nature of the monologues, with one train of thought springing to the next, decentres the narrative element," bringing about random details that resist ordering. "Memories are piled one on the other" (Lea 2005: 117). All memories, however disparate they seem, are connected by a common idea: that of the impossibility of escaping one's past. This is also at work in *The Virtuoso*. The title character cannot escape from nostalgia for the days when he

was working to reach fame. We see how enthusiastic he once was about his work when he says “Everything sang.” (Swift 2009: 239).

In Swift’s novels “an anachronic structure engages the reader in the suspense inherent in the reconstruction of a puzzle and a hesitant, traumatized narrator”. The main aspects of the stories are “loss and transcendence”. Narrators arrive at such experiences in their attempt to better understand what happened to them and why. (Malcolm 2003) Swift's narrators attempt to analyse and explain their own histories and this links them with experiences of crisis, of loss, or of change. (Malcolm 2003) In the poem *The Virtuoso*, the puzzle is not so complicated, and the narrator has not gone through a traumatic experience. On the contrary, the poem examines a special moment, when the narrator was still working to become a well-known and skillful musician. The time is “Some crisp morning/ In autumn that seemed there/ Just for him [...]” (Swift 2009: 238). His passion for music and for his work is rewarding in itself. His satisfaction with his efforts turns his reality into a function of his mood.

Getting the reader’s sympathy is an important aspect in the writings of the Romantic poets, such as Coleridge and Wordsworth, who influenced, intertextually speaking, some of Swift’s novels. In the Introduction to *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XIV<sup>1</sup>, we are told the following:

Coleridge and Wordsworth collaboratively published *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, marking the rise of the British Romantic movement. According to Coleridge, in their collaborative plans it was agreed Coleridge would compose a series of lyrical poems exploring the Romantic and supernatural, and seeking there to earn a reader’s “poetic faith,” while Wordsworth planned to use the self and the everyday as his subject in poems that would replace a sense of familiarity with an air of the supernatural. Pairing these two approaches, the poets hoped, might bring into harmony “the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination.”

It is the combination of the ideas of the two Romantic poets, Coleridge and Wordsworth, that is at work in an intertextual manner in Swift’s novels, demonstrated in the aspects of the ordinary and extraordinary in everyday life. Wordsworth and Coleridge believed

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Biographia-Litararia-Coleridge.pdf>

that Romanticism should focus on a poetic language accessible to all classes, not just the elite. Augustan poetry was considered too sophisticated. Wordsworth believed that poetry should be a spontaneous expression of feelings. He valued the intensity of feelings at the expense of form. Wordsworth also believed that the mind of the poet is not separated from the external world; the two are connected. Thus the poet creates the external world through his perceptions. The poet's mind is not merely a passive recorder of external surroundings. Swift's narrators work in the same way as the poet in Wordsworth's vision. They offer to the reader their understanding of the world, not just a passive description of it. Just like Wordsworth's poet, Swift's narrators are gifted with stronger emotional reactions to incidents, are more sensitive than the average man, and are also "affected by absent things as if they were present", most often by past events. Wordsworth believed that the poet was "a man speaking to men". This too is characteristic of Swift's narrators: they are ordinary, common people. Yet the way they tell their stories brings to mind the Romantic poet as described by Wordsworth. "Lyrical ballad" is composed of two terms. The ballad is usually an anonymous narrative folk poem. Lyric poetry is personal, often with a first-person speaker. Wordsworth uses the form of the ballad to represent everyday life.

Like Swift's novels, his poem *The Virtuoso* does not lack intertextual references to the Romantic poets, specifically Wordsworth. Wordsworth's poem *The Power of Music* brings to mind Swift's poem, through the introduction of a musician whose music seems to transform everyday reality into something magic. The first two stanzas of *The Power of Music* also present the extraordinary found in the ordinary, everyday reality:

"An Orpheus! an Orpheus! yes, Faith may grow bold,  
And take to herself all the wonders of old;--  
Near the stately Pantheon you'll meet with the same  
In the street that from Oxford hath borrowed its name.  
His station is there; and he works on the crowd,  
He sways them with harmony merry and loud;  
He fills with his power all their hearts to the brim—  
Was aught ever heard like his fiddle and him?"

The extraordinary is expressed by the comparison with Orpheus, and it is contrasted with the space of the "street... from Oxford". The musician "works on the crowd" by sending

them through his music into an extraordinary kind of mood, making them see reality differently. Swift's poem focuses on the effect of music and the effect of study on the musician himself.

*Making an Elephant: Writing from Within*, in which Swift comments on his works, allows us to understand his perspective on his writings; it also makes readers aware of the fact that he wrote poems in-between writing his novels.

Since Swift's writing style is similar to that of Virginia Woolf, her theory about the lyrical novel makes a good starting point in the analysis of Swift's work. In her diary, Woolf comments on the mixture of genres, of poetry and prose, as well as on the difference between the presentation of story in her style of novel, as compared to traditional novels. She also lets us understand that her novel will be, in fact, a mixture of narrative with more poetic and dramatic modes or genres. Woolf suggests that readers should compare various genres and arts in order to intensify the lyrical atmosphere as well as the dynamic feel of the story. The term "lyrical novel" was used in 1963 by Ralph Freedman to describe Woolf's works in comparison with those by Gide and Hesse in his book *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, André Gide, and Virginia Woolf*. Features of the lyrical novel include, in his view, the focus on inner life, the "conversion of character and scene into symbolic imagery" (1963: 187), the "attempt to translate the traditional forms of the novel into organized explorations of consciousness" (1963: 187-188), the process of depersonalization of the self, and "the impact of the external world upon the inner life," which is the process of awareness (1963: 191).

The poems in Swift's autobiographical volume will be used to answer questions such as: How must the claim that Swift's novels are similar to poetry be expressed theoretically? What techniques give such an impression to the reader and why?

There is an ongoing debate when it comes to style about whether form and content can be regarded as separate. One of the commonly held ideas, as mentioned in David Lodge's book *Language of Fiction*, is that form and content are inseparable when it comes to the criticism of poems, but they are distinct when it comes to the criticism of prose (1998: 13), as stated by Mark Schorer. The novel's technique is not regarded by critics as a primary element but as a supplementary element, according to Lodge (1998: 12). The novelist's medium is evaluated, according to critics, by the extent to which the novel imitates, judges, and orders life and not by its use of language (Lodge 1998: 13). Language is just regarded as secondary in this case. Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short, in their book *Style in Fiction*, are also concerned with this age-old problem of whether form and content may be regarded as separate. They speak about

dualism and monism: “The dualist holds that there can be different ways of conveying the same content. The monist holds that this is a mistake, and that any alteration of form entails a change of content” (2007: 17).

Can we say that there is some benefit to regarding form and content as inseparable when analyzing a novel as well as when analyzing a poem? For this purpose we can look at Graham Swift’s poem *The Virtuoso*, at William Wordsworth’s *The Power of Music*, and at some connections between *The Virtuoso* and Swift’s novel *The Light of Day*. We notice common themes, such as moments of vision, inner perception of reality, the feeling of nostalgia, and the idea that everyday reality might not be so ordinary at all. Can a poem and a novel express the same ideas, but by means of different forms?

Romantic poems and Swift’s works, whether poems or novels, share common themes such as: isolation of the hero, travelling, moments of vision, concern with nature, with personal and public history, with self-expression, and with the use of imagination to understand the world. We start from what we know, so this sort of comparison shapes the way readers perceive Swift’s novels. The use of previously known texts, from Romantic lyric poetry and from other poems and plays, creates a different kind of novel, the lyrical novel.

Swift explains the way he views novel writing in *Making an Elephant: Writing from Within*, a collection of non-fiction writing and interviews. Swift remembers the event of an inoculation, which he compares to fiction. Swift claims that “Fiction is also a kind of inoculation, a vaccine, preserving us from such plagues as reality can breed.” (Swift 2009: 11). Swift believes that “fiction – storytelling – is a magical thing.” (Swift 2009: 11). Moments of being make a story seem special. Swift makes us recall the idea of “being under a story’s ‘spell’” (Swift 2009: 12), claiming that “the power of a good story is a primitive, irreducible mystery that answers to some need deep in human nature” (Swift 2009: 12). Like Woolf, Swift suggests that there are special moments in fiction which appeal to readers. Readers may experience certain stories as “magic” or as special. What Woolf calls “moments of being” are experienced intensely. For Swift, stories can express a hidden truth, a revelation:

The real magic (if that expression is legitimate) of fiction goes much deeper than a few sprinklings of hocus-pocus, but we know when it’s there and we feel its tingle in the spine. There can even be something magical about the perfectly judged and timed revelation on the page of an unanswerable truth we already inwardly acknowledge. In good fiction, without any trickery, truth and magic aren’t incompatible at all. (Swift 2009:13)

The fiction Swift talks about can be replaced by music in the specific case of the poem *The Virtuoso*. In the poem, it is not stories but music which is magic and which transforms the everyday life for the musician.

According to Swift, therefore, stories draw attention to moments of vision, or, in the case of the poem, to music. Readers experience moments of vision while reading a novel. Moreover, moments of vision, which are experienced intensely as revelations or shocks, are found in Swift's novels too, bringing to mind the Romantic poets. Similar settings trigger them (nature or the city). Swift favours first-person narration: "As an author who's favoured the intimacy of the first person over the 'authorial' third person, I'd regard it as a mark of achievement if in my work the author seems to vanish" (Swift 2009: 1). Yet the effect of the third person in his poem is similar to first person. When Swift discusses the way he writes in *Making an Elephant*, he explains the representation of time in his novels:

The framework is broadly chronological, but (as in my novels) some liberties are taken with time. The book starts, as it were, when I was six and ends with a man who lived in the sixteenth century. In between, there is more modest hopping forward or back. (Swift 2009: 3)

The leap in time is quite clear in his poem. From the present, the musician returns to the past. Moments of vision are just one of the features Swift has borrowed from the Romantic poets. He also makes similar use of the role of the artist to offer the world a new vision of reality. This is what music does in the poem *The Virtuoso*. The morning, the musician suggests, becomes "magic" as soon as he begins to play his instrument. Everyday reality becomes something else, and like this, the vision of reality changes: "Everything sang" (Swift 2009: 239). The song no longer belongs to the musician alone. He has come to see the world differently through his music, and now he shares this vision with his audience, by playing for them. While he interprets a piece, any musician can add something of his own vision and transmit it to his audience

Narrators can all be regarded as artists when they have moments of vision. As in the Romantic version of confessional poetry, they focus on intimate, personal reflections, using self-expression to present a different vision of the world. The lyrical novel is structured into lyrical monologues, which are the result of the hero's isolation, which in Romantic poetry prompts the need for confession. The first-person speaker is also borrowed from Romantic poetry, allowing for greater self-expression. Powerful and spontaneous emotions are of import. As in Romantic Poetry, the characters use imagination to reshape reality. Nature is another Romantic element present in Swift's and Woolf's novels. Swift uses Romantic symbols such

as water. The Romantic preference for freedom is also there in the idea of travelling. Wordsworth's double awareness of memory explains the connection between the narrators' past and present selves. These tropes are part of a general cultural heritage which readers instinctively associate with the Romantics. Writers either make the same instinctive association with these tropes when they create the lyrical moments in their novels, or they purposefully use them to prompt readers to make these lyrical associations.

The Romantic poets have given expression and artistic form to creativity, imagination, and sensitivity, which will always be relevant to human psychology. There is a general tendency for readers, critics, and writers to associate lyricism with Romantic poetry. This can be seen in the moments when such Romantic tropes are introduced in Swift's novels. Such moments include reflecting on the past, present, and future, as well as on certain moments in one's life; they include imagining stories about another character, and expressing one's feelings of joy when walking throughout the city, as well as other kinds of dreamy states. Romantic tropes lead readers to apply the pattern of Romantic poetry in order to experience the novel's lyricism more intensely. The novel is, after all, usually strongly associated with narrative prose. These tropes are there to compensate for moments when prose may not really use lyrical language. The stream-of-consciousness itself was used by the Romantic poets for inspiration.

Together with these common Romantic tropes, we need to focus on style and structure. If we consider Leech and Short's assertion that dualism and monism are different ways of expressing the same content and that changes in form lead to changes in content, respectively, can we say that the same content is conveyed in two ways: as prose and as poetry? Isn't the distinction between prose and poetry blurred in Swift's case?

We could regard the poem *The Virtuoso* as a paraphrase of the same sort of nostalgia for the past as that in Swift's novel *The Light of Day*. Leech and Short discuss the issue of the possibility of paraphrasing a text:

Dualism assumes that one can paraphrase the sense of a text, and that there is a valid separation of sense from significance. Dualists do not in general treat stylistic choices as devoid of significance: if they did, they would scarcely find style worth studying. Rather, an enlightened dualist will search for some significance, which we may call stylistic value, in a writer's choice to express a certain 'sense' in *this* rather than *that* way. (Leech and Short 2007: 20)

Thus we may ask whether there is a significant difference in expressing the same ideas in the form of a novel or in the form of a poem. In our case, our attention is drawn to the fact



that poem and prose are regarded as quite similar when it comes to the lyrical novel. However, a poem is much more concise and opens the way for the reader to imagine something more, leading the reader to be able to expand the poems *The Virtuoso* and *The Power of Music* into the nostalgic mood found in the novel *The Light of Day*.

Swift's poetic novel creates the illusion of another text, that of a poem. Since the reader can become confused in all this movement from poetry to narrative modes, narratological theories on narrators will offer insight. The fabula refers to those incidents which occur to the novels' characters, arranged in a logical and chronological way, even if they are not arranged this way in the final novel. The fabula is just the "raw material of the story", as Paul Cobley explains. The writer will organize this raw material to suit his artistic purposes. The mindset of Postmodernism promotes experimenting with the plot. Such experimentations are explained by looking at the various layers of a story. Postmodernism offers the readers various illusions around the concept of plot. They can reconstruct the novels as narratives or as poems, depending on which writing style is suggested to them. Swift's readers can perceive *The Light of Day* as a poem because his writing style suggests that interpretation.

We can say that this writing style suggested in Swift's novel is based on common themes with Romantic lyrical poetry.

The choice of poetic expression in Swift's novel says a lot about its contents. The issues discussed are, as we have seen, related to life's feelings of nostalgia and transformative power of one's mood on reality.

Genre is all a matter of the readers' interpretation. This is how Jonathan Culler, in his book on semiotic approaches to literature, *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981), introduces one of Todorov's theories which, while specifically about the fantastic literary genre, can explain the operations readers do with any genre. The fantastic genre's striking feature is figurative language; in a similar way, the lyrical novel has some features which remind readers of poems and which gain their attention. "The reader must perform imaginative transformations on the various things seen and heard," Culler (1981: 76-77) describes the reader's analysis of Blake's poems. Readers imagine and interpret. They do not stop at what they expect to be there or at what seems to be there, be it a *fabula* or a genre. Swift's novels draw them into imagining a genre and a *fabula* which are not narrative but lyrical. Readers are offered illusions; prose uses features we have been used to finding in poetry. What is more, poetry uses features found in prose. In *The Virtuoso*, readers start imagining a story, with a character, a musician, who talks to them about his nostalgia for the beginning of his career. His career is in fact a passion for



him. This is why his passion for music transforms the reality around him into something extraordinary.

“Rules in poetry are made only to be broken”, Leech and Short say (1991: 12). They divide the use of poetic language into categories such as plain, middle and grand styles. They suggest that there is an aesthetic value common to all these styles which distinguishes poetic language from ordinary language. For the plain styles, we pay attention to the choice and arrangement of words, as Swift does. In order to be surprising, to “Revitalize the language of poetry, the poet draws directly on the resources of contemporary language” (Leech and Short 1991: 23). Swift uses both ordinary and poetic language in a surprising mixture. Leech and Short note a striking feature of contemporary poetic language, a trend within which Swift fits:

The effect of the return to ordinary language in the present century has been far-reaching. The feeling that there are intrinsically poetical and unpoetical sectors of the language has been repudiated. (Leech and Short 1991: 23)

This has led to strange combinations of language registers which can confuse or create illusions. What sort of novel keeps the poetic effect always in the foreground? This is a way to “escape banality”, as Leech and Short suggest, when they use these words to title a section (1991: 23). Swift presents everyday life poetically: “So this is their life, what they do every day,/ [...] No, no, look again. It’s not what it seems.” (Swift, *Rush Hour*) The same holds true for *The Virtuoso*. Apparently common incidents are presented in a different light, due to this special use of language. He also uses structures usually associated with poetry in his prose, or, better put, structures which have something poetic about them, even when used in drama. As Woolf claimed in her essays, we usually associate drama with poetry and the novel with prose. Yet this is just one possibility among many when it comes to the writer’s creativity with language. Lyrical monologues remind readers of their previous uses, in poetry and drama, and of their previous readings. The poetic effect is inserted into the usual narrative mode we expect of novels.

Prose is mixed with a poetic effect in Swift’s novels, while poems have a prose quality to them, yet retain their lyricism. De Paiva Correia believes that there is always at least some minimal action even in a lyric poem. De Correia claims that “the lyrical mode, similarly to the narrative and dramatic ones, is a powerful transmitter of action”, and thus can lend itself to a coherent plot. The use of the lyrical mode transmits action, and it is here that the active role of the reader comes in. While reading *The Virtuoso*, we imagine a now famous musician who

looks back with nostalgia over his beginning career, the work he put into it, and to the way his passion for music gave him the sensation that the world was more beautiful.

Hühn also claims that there is always a story, even in lyric poetry. There are always incidents, even in a poem. These features will make poetry suitable for a narratological analysis. According to Hühn,

[...] first, poetry can profitably be analysed on the basis of narratological categories and thus be compared with prose narratives proper (by poetry, I mean the lyric in the narrow sense, not merely narrative poems such as ballads or verse narratives); and second, events are a prerequisite of narrativity in fictional literature as well as in the lived world. (Hühn 2005-2007)

Thus, the poem *The Virtuoso* crosses the border between genres, poetry and prose, while the lyrical effect remains. We notice the theme of memory, of going back to the past, for which Swift is famous in his novels. Swift adds an element of surprise to an apparently ordinary contemplation of the past: it is not an out of the ordinary incident to which the musician goes back nostalgically. He goes back nostalgically to moments that would be common in anyone's life: working to achieve something, working to become better at what he does. These efforts are very rewarding, and in these moments, the whole world becomes a more beautiful place, everything seems to sing, everything seems to take part in his joy. It is not the place that creates a certain state of mind. The process is reversed: the state of mind has an influence on the perception of the place. From this point of view, Swift defamiliarizes the usual expectations from Romantic poetry, where the place (nature usually) influences the characters' states of mind. At the same time, Swift preserves elements specific to Romanticism, such as the influence of music on obtaining moments of revelation. What is more, Swift shares with Romantic poet Wordsworth the preference for very simple and clear language, as well as the combination of the ordinary with the extraordinary.

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