

Ottava Rima and Novelistic Discourse

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In “Discourse in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin goes to some lengths to distinguish novelistic from poetic discourse. And yet, as noted by Neil Roberts (1), he uses a poetic text, Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, as one of his prime examples of novelistic discourse (Bakhtin 322–24, 329). Bakhtin’s theory is that poetic genres are monologic, presupposing “the unity of the language system and . . . of the poet’s individuality,” as opposed to the novel, which is dialogic, “heteroglot, multivoiced, multi-styled and often multi-linguaged.” (264–65). This paper contends that, by Bakhtin’s own criteria, some verse forms are especially well designed for novelistic discourse. The form chosen for particular scrutiny is *ottava rima*, a stanza that has been used for narrative purposes for many centuries, originating in the Italian oral tradition of the *cantastorie* (Wilkins 9–10; De Robertis 9–15).

Clearly, *ottava rima* could not have originated as an English oral form, for it requires too many rhymes for this rhyme-poor, relatively uninflected language. Using a heroic line—in Italian the hendecasyllabic, in English the iambic pentameter—the stanza’s rhyme scheme is ABABABCC. Thus it resembles the English sonnet in a sense, for it begins with an alternating structure and concludes with a couplet that is alien to both the rhymes and the rhyme pattern that precede it. As with this type of sonnet, a potential appears for a rupture in the discourse between the alternating structure and the couplet. Alternating verse tends to lean forward not to the next line but

to the line after that for the echo or completion of a rhyme, encouraging the discourse to proceed apace with narrative or description; but a couplet is a closed, circling structure, that faces inward rather than onward. Even the crudest improvised *ottava rima* narrative will display some fluctuation between telling the story and reflecting upon the story as its unfolding discourse pulsates between alternate and couplet rhyme.

By the time of the high Renaissance in Italy, *ottava rima* was well established as a written form, though it still persisted in the oral tradition of the *improvvisatori*—some of whom still use it today. The form had become so much the standard for poetic narrative that Dante's invention of *terza rima* for his epic, *La Commedia*, was little less than a revolution. Dante may well have had a Bakhtinian suspicion that epic poetry required more unity of voice than *ottava rima* would allow. Whereas *ottava* divides discourse into discrete little eight-line packets, *terza rima* is a continuous form, rhyming ABA BCB CDC DED . . . etc. It is a kind of unchecked alternating pattern, each tercet unclosed and forever hearkening forward towards as-yet-uncompleted rhymes in the next tercet. It thus permits long strophes and paragraphs of unbroken utterance, though not quite as freely as Milton's epic blank verse. In order to achieve formal closure at the end of a canto, Dante adds to the last tercet a single line that rhymes with the tercet's enclosed line. Thus this final structure is an alternating quatrain, a more symmetrical and complete verse form than a tercet: . . . VWV WXW XYX YZYZ.

The two most famous Renaissance *ottava rima* narratives are Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* and Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. Like their English successor, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, these poems are long, magical, episodic and multifaceted, possessing a great many characters and strands of story. As early as 1876 the Italian critic, Pio Rajna, declared that they were not epics but novels—mainly because he saw *ottava* as the perfect medium for modern narrative (18). But, even earlier, and more explicitly than Dante, Tasso had expressed similarly Bakhtinian ideas about genre. Tasso desired to create an epic and believed, as he argues in his prose essays, that epic poetry possesses the virtue of unity—a unity that, since Homer, has not been simple but compound: “composta unità” (*Prose*, 390, 438). This crucial feature of unity Tasso must have felt that his *Gerusalemme liberata* was lacking, for he rewrote the poem in 1593 as the austere *Gerusalemme conquistata*, with many of the poten-

tially distracting romantic episodes omitted. But *Gerusalemme conquistata* was composed in the same *ottava* stanza as its predecessor and Tasso remained so dissatisfied with it that, late in life, he produced another, quite different, attempt at epic, *Il Creato del mondo*, which was more stylistically revolutionary even than *La Commedia*, for it was written in *versi sciolti*, or Italian blank verse, a form generally considered inappropriate to narrative during the Renaissance. Clearly, Tasso chose it in reaction to *ottava*, as a form more conducive to epic unity. Tasso's insight was later vindicated by Milton, who was no doubt influenced by Tasso's poem not only in his account of the Creation but also in his choice of English blank verse for *Paradise Lost*.

The *ottava rima* that Tasso inherited from Ariosto is not encouraging to unity of structure or voice. Firstly, it divides the discourse into symmetrical eight-line units, many of which are as self-consciously crafted as sonnets and hence almost as self-contained. And secondly, because the verse *sounds* different in lines 7 and 8 of each stanza, it *sounds* as if a different voice speaks, an impression that is tantamount to fact in the perceptual experience of a reader. And above and beyond impressionism and formal facts, Ariosto very often exploits this couplet quite clearly and semantically for a change of discourse, typically shifting here from narrative to commentary—summarizing, interpreting, or ironizing what went before. In the following stanza from *Orlando furioso*, one of the female knights, Bradamante, is attacking another, Marfisa, out of jealousy of Ruggiero:

Ma tarda è la sua giunta; che si trova
 Marfisa inontra, e di tanta ira piena
 (poi che s'ha vista alla seconda prova
 cader sì facilmente su l'arena),
 che pregar nulla, e nulla gridar giova
 a Ruggier che di questo avea gran pena:
 sì l'odio e l'ira le guerriere abbaglia,
 cha fan da disperate la battaglia. (36.48)

But is too slow withal; for on her feet
 She finds Marphisa, with such fierce disdain
 Inflamed, at being in that second heat
 So easily reversed upon the plain,
 She hears in vain exclaim, in vain entreat,

Rogero, who beholds their strife with pain.
 So blinded are the pair with spite and rage,
 That they with desperate fury battle wage.
 (Transl Rose, 36.48)

Whereas the sestet uses the characters as focalizers—all three of them in turn—the couplet is the narrator’s commentary. Slightly amused, but not unsympathetic, he shows that the *guerriere* are so dazzled (“sí . . . abbaglia”) by their hate and anger (“l’odio e l’ira”) that their viewpoints may be discounted by an impartial observer. The cause of the fighting is, as the reader knows, a misunderstanding on the part of Bradamante, who is normally a rather idealized character, here made temporarily ridiculous by love. But the narrator is not only smiling at Bradamante in love (a minor variation on the *furioso* theme); he is also making a sly point about battle and war in general—the staple material of epic verse. The close couplet rhyme, making an audible connection between the verb “abbaglia” and the noun “battaglia,” suggests that battle and this sort of dazzled blindness are naturally related.

Tasso, inheriting Ariosto’s tradition, attempted to purge it of many of the features that he regarded as inimical to epic. According to Dennis Looney, Tasso was especially critical of Ariosto’s “multiple plots;” and, indeed, *Gerusalemme liberata* is, in its larger structures, much less sprawling and digressive than *Orlando furioso*. It pursues far fewer story lines and characters and the narrator’s tone is much more consistently sympathetic to the characters’ pathos and heroism. He uses a high style which is almost never humorous, avoiding like the plague Ariosto’s ribaldry and even, to a large extent, his irony.

In her rhetorical analysis of *Gerusalemme liberata*, Maggie Günsberg does find among its many “negative constructions” a type of dramatic irony. However, what she points up is not the disjunctive irony found in Ariosto but a kind of emphatic construction, serving rather as Milton’s similes of inequality do, to highlight differences between appearance or expectation and the hyperbolic “reality” of the poem’s world (Günsberg 84, 109-48). This elevating device is very different from the blatant juxtaposition of incongruent viewpoints that comprises Ariostan irony. Ariosto’s narrative shifts very often have that Socratic effect described by Bakhtin as “bring[ing] the world closer and familiariz[ing] it in order to

investigate it freely”; Bakhtin (24-25), like Georg Lukács (74-75), regards this kind of irony as definitive of the novel.

Tasso must have tried to excise this kind of novelizing irony from his *magnum opus* because he recognized that it worked against unity. But, as he was later to recognize, the *ottava rima* stanza constantly undermined his efforts. The effect is quite evident in the following example:

Grande è il zelo d'onor, grande il desire
 Che Tancredi del sangue ha del Pagano;
 Nè la sete ammorzar crede de l'ire,
 Se n'esce stilla fuor per l'altrui mano:
 E con lo scudo il copre; e, Non ferire,
 Grida a quanti rincontra anco lontano;
 Sì che salvo il nemico infra gli amici
 Tragge da l'arme irate e vincitrici.

(*Gerusalemme liberata*, 19.7)

Great was his thirst of praise, great the desire
 That Tancred had the Pagan's blood to spill,
 Nor could that quench his wrath or calm his ire,
 If other hand his foe should foil or kill;
 He sav'd him with his shield, and cry'd—Retire,
 (To all he met,) and do this knight none ill.—
 And thus defending 'gainst his friends his foe,
 Through thousand angry weapons safe they go.

(Transl. Fairfax 19.7)

The word “sì” (“so” or “thus”) that introduces the couplet is the opposite of markers of contrast such as “ma” or “però” (“but” or “however”), which Tasso seldom uses in this position in his stanzas. And yet, despite its apparent assent to and underlining of what went before, “sì” can also invoke a wholly new voice. And here it does so, just as it does in the Ariosto couplet, introducing an authorial comment that ironizes the situation simply by summarizing it, and bringing into close proximity the striking—and ironic—opposition between “il nemico” and “gli amici” (“the enemy” and “the friends”). The couplet rhyme also highlights the ironic opposition between “amici” and “vincitrici” (“friends” and “conquering ones”). This

sort of verbal tightening into wordplay and wit is not at all uncommon in Tasso's couplets, try as he might to exclude sudden turns in his discourse.

The contracting and sharpening effect of the *ottava's* couplet is partly ascribable to the contrast between alternate and couplet rhyme perceived by the reader, but it is also dependent on the effect of couplets on the writer's composition. Being self-contained and more well-formed in the Gestalt sense than an alternating structure (Tsur 65–66), a couplet in the *ottava* context encourages a complete utterance that is briefer than what went before and hence more pithy and proverbial. It is likely to remain focused on the same topic as the sestet because of the paragraphing or batching effect of the stanza. Though it can be used simply for a change in voice, it favors an utterance that contracts and sharpens in narrative focus as well as style, lending itself to irony and judgement, in Tasso forming itself into narrator's comment even in defiance of author's intention.

Byron, unlike Tasso, found himself in his element in *ottava rima*. Once he had discovered this stanza, via John Hookham Frere's translation of Pulci's burlesque into English, Byron was suddenly able—in one text—to express all of his writeable personality and preoccupations, both those evident in the Romantic Tales and those of the witty personal letters and journals. Virginia Woolf claims, slightly enviously, that Byron discovered in this style an “elastic shape which will hold whatever you choose to put into it” (180). Woolf's envy is of course a novelist's envy, and her insight is shared by Bakhtin (33) and Lukács (59), both of whom, generally distinguishing novels from poetry, make an exception in the case of Byron's *Don Juan*.

Exerting no effort to suppress the stanza's potential for multivocalism, Byron uses its couplets to their utmost effect, outdoing even Ariosto in his stylistic bravado:

In thoughts like these true Wisdom may discern
 Longings sublime, and aspirations high,
 Which some are born with, but the most part learn
 To plague themselves withal, they know not why:
 'T was strange that one so young should thus concern
 His brain about the action of the sky;
 If you think 't was philosophy that this did,
 I can't help thinking puberty assisted. (1.93)

In contrast to the quotations from Ariosto and Tasso, this whole stanza embodies narrative commentary on the action, which at this stage of the story involves the teenaged Juan wandering about the woods experiencing Wordsworthian feelings. Wordsworth—a common butt of Byron’s satire—is explicitly mentioned in the preceding stanzas. The main reason for this selection of a stanza of commentary is that, unlike Ariosto, whose narrator only occasionally converses with his reader at any length and unlike Tasso, who mostly avoids overt authorial comment in the interests of epic unity, Byron allows his narrator to interject and philosophize at every possible opportunity, so that at least half of the poem comprises the so-called “digressions.” These “digressions” are very variable, some, like this stanza, comprising commentary directly relevant to episodes and characters in the story. But others are totally unrelated to the story and all of them, like the narration itself, are extremely variable in voice and tone. The “digressions” use as their jumping-off points a myriad objects and ideas, some extradiegetic and some intradiegetic, but their underpinning at the level of style can clearly be found in the stanzaic structure.

In the quoted stanza, the sestet speculates Romantically upon the sources of Juan’s “Longings,” using a high style carefully reminiscent of Wordsworth’s, especially in such self-elevating words as “sublime” and “high,” though certain colloquialisms such as “plague themselves” and the fact that the character is not a focalizer are rather un-Wordsworthian. These hints are subtle, though, for the couplet comes as a sudden change in mood and voice, pointing its poisoned quill, in that surprise deictic “you,” directly at the reader who has been suckered into believing all that cant about “philosophy.” The sudden familiarity, signalled in the use of personal pronouns, and the bathetic descent from high to low style—“puberty” being a term un conducive to elevation of thought—is typical of Byron’s shock tactics in his couplets, which can shift from facetious to serious just as often, from discourse to story, from story to discourse, from one focalizer to another within the story, from narrator’s comment on the story to narrator’s comment on his own world. The stanza is the matrix in which Byron’s famous mobility finds its perfect medium.

Don Juan was a major forerunner of *Eugene Onegin*, Bakhtin’s touchstone (verse) novel; however, Byron’s influence did not create *Onegin*’s stanza. Pushkin did experiment in *ottava rima*, writing his verse-novelette “The Little House in Kolomna” in it, but he clearly felt that the stanza did

not suit his purposes in Russian perfectly, for he invented his own, more complicated, 14-liner for his *magnum opus*. In fact, after the Romantic period, in English as in other languages, very few narratives appear in *ottava rima*. Algernon Charles Swinburne was convinced that this neglect of *ottava rima* was because Byron was so great a master of the form that no-one could dare to challenge him in it (251–52). And even W. H. Auden, in his “Letter to Lord Byron,” a kind of poet’s reply to *Don Juan*, written in a similarly amused, cynical but compassionate tone, rejected *ottava rima*. Claiming that he would “come a cropper” in the eight-line stanza, Auden chose Chaucer’s seven-line rhyme-royal for his “Letter” instead (42).

But this situation may be changing. The verse novel is in fashion again, thanks partly to Vikram Seth’s bestselling *The Golden Gate*, published in 1986, in *Onegin*-stanzas. A torrent of books calling themselves novels in verse has appeared in print since then. These texts are composed in a very wide variety of verse forms, including many different types of free verse. But the popularity of *ottava rima* among verse novelists is unmistakable.

In 1975, before the current trend, Kenneth Koch wrote *The Duplications* in it, a somewhat surreal long poem showing some influence, in its plot structure, of Ariosto. Though its general sense of magical confusion tends to blur distinctions in narrative voice, and though the stanzas tend to run on so as to make quotation of a single one difficult, there are many examples like the following in which a shift—ironic or otherwise—occurs in between lines 6 and 7:

To stay afloat and find their island home
 Just one more time, and then, they vowed, forever
 They’d be obedient to the speechless dome
 And parchless eye of heaven; they would never
 Do any bad or selfish thing, nor roam
 From Samos off to any place whatever.
 These vows were heard by no one but the fishes
 Whom usually they fried and served on dishes. (39)

At this point in the narrative the island of Samos, one of the sites and cities that have been “duplicated” or reproduced magically in another place, has been submerged by an earthquake, leaving all its inhabitants floating in the sea. The shift from the apparently serious subject-matter of

the sestet to the apparently flippant in the couplet is typical of this poem's shifts which constantly prevent the reader from identifying any moral or emotional center on which to base an authoritative reading. Koch uses the stanza as one among many ironizing devices that keep the meaning of the poem unstable.

More Byronic—and claimed by its author as a novel—is Anthony Burgess's *Byrne*, published posthumously in 1995. This book-length narrative is composed mainly in *ottava*, but includes as well a short section in Spenserian stanzas and a few sonnets. Burgess, despite his background in prose fiction, makes good use of stanzaic structure:

The London police, however, did not faint.
 They clomped into the show in blue-clad torrents
 And closed it down. In Parliament, some quaint
 Ruskinian terms expressed the State's abhorrence.
 The same thing happened later to that saint
 Of sexuality, the dying Lawrence.
 Byrne felt the arrow of the martyrised.
 He rather liked it, and he was surprised. (23)

In this example, the sestet starts by narrating the repercussions of an exhibition of Modernist paintings by the protagonist, Michael Byrne, and then wandering on fairly seamlessly into a comparison of these with responses to D.H. Lawrence's fiction. The narrator is addressing a literate, late-twentieth-century narratee, who knows the broad outlines of early-twentieth-century cultural history—a history whose contours are reproduced in the patterns of Byrne's life. The couplet, ironic and self-reflexive in itself, signals a sudden shift to Byrne's own consciousness and point of view. That the rhyme "martyrised" should bring "surprised" is *no* surprise; that the "surprise" should be occasioned by the martyr's "liking" of his condition instead of by the condition itself is the revelation that undermines the situation's gravity and casts retrospective doubt even upon "the dying Lawrence"'s possible pleasures. It should be noted that Byrne's point of view is not the same as the narrator's, and their difference is implicated in the couplet's irony. The narrator of this verse novel is a hired "poetaster" (5), paid by Byrne to recount his history and that of his many

illigitimate offspring. The ironic polyphony of voices that this situation entails is well underpinned by *ottava rima*.

The Australian Alan Wearne's *The Lovemakers*, published in 2001, is written in a multitude of different verse forms—partly to suit its many narrative and dramatic voices—but its late section in *ottava rima* is striking. This *ottava* section narrates a cameo tale about a wild suburban party to which the vicar, an old friend of the host Leo, is invited. Here is a sample:

And now from every footpath, laneway, road,
the muscle-bunnies have commenced their entry;
each hoping to be subject of an ode,
a Billy Joe for someone's Bobbie Gentry,
their self-obsessions stalled on overload
(a pity Leo can't afford a sentry).
Yet if their torsoes probably are glistening,
they sound banal and nobody is listening. (341–42)

The sestet of this stanza pays close attention to the muscular strangers who crash the party—to the extent of even using them as focalizers in lines 3 and 4, though by line 5 the “hopes” that were empathically delivered earlier are judged as excessive and in line 6 the focalization has clearly shifted—perhaps to one of Leo's more conservative invited guests. The couplet, starting with “Yet,” announces itself as a much more overt turn than this, but what it offers is in fact a summary of the sestet's material from a much more distant point of view. “Probably” suggests indifference to the potential seduction of “glistening”; and in fact the shift from “glistening” to “[not] listening” signalled in the rhyme is an exact chart of what has happened to the main characters since the earlier, “Lovemak[ing],” parts of the novel. The characters are, ironically, no longer young enough to prefer “torsoes” to interesting conversation. Though several points of view are successively represented here, the stanza's structure helps to mark the last one as the most authoritative.

In *Bloodlines*, a verse novel published in 2000, Fred D'Aguiar uses *ottava rima* throughout to narrate a tale of escaping slaves in nineteenth-century America. In the foreground of this story is a passionate love affair between a white slave-owner's son and a young slave woman, the parents of the main narrator. D'Aguiar's *ottava rima* is reminiscent of Derek Wal-

cott's *terza rima* in that masterpiece of contemporary verse narrative, *Omeros*, in which the stanza form is regularly backgrounded. In D'Aguiar's case this backgrounding is mostly achieved by using imperfect rhymes, run-on lines and midline pauses. The stanza, which is of course a reminder of the narrator's presence in any poem, comes to the fore as soon as an example appears that, like the following, is self-emphasizing:

Christy and Faith staggered in an embrace,
bracing each other upright and they marched
off that plantation, each shunned by their race.
Their backs were stiff and straight as if starched
by their conviction. This was their first taste
of what they could never achieve apart:
alone, they were too weak and too compliant;
together they were strong, upright, buoyant. (18)

The stanza opens with an end-stopped line, a signal to the reader—of this very enjambed poem, at least—to pay attention to structure. It also starts with quite showy, perfect rhymes, such as “marched . . . starched,” which have the same effect. And the couplet, just as in Ariosto, Tasso and Byron, quite noticeably brings in a new voice. It is not a new character's voice; the narrator still speaks, but in a different mode. He takes up here a more prophetic vision of the characters' dilemma that both summarizes the present and points forward into the future. And as in Polonius' speech to Laertes, the proverbial quality of the utterance is created out of the shape-ness of the couplet form.

Thus we see that the *ottava rima* stanza does not encourage what Bakhtin sees as the condition of poetry, “a unitary and singular language and a unitary, monologically sealed-off utterance” (296). On the contrary, the form commands—or creates—a dialogue of narrative voices and a plurality of viewpoints which even a determined epic poet is unable to unify. It in fact makes novels out of poems not intended to be novels and functions as an excellent medium for “intentional” verse novels of a variety of types.

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