

A journey through the stylistics of poetry

Review of Peter Verdonk, *The Stylistics of Poetry: Context, Cognition, Discourse, History*. (Series: *Advances in Stylistics*). London: Bloomsbury, 2013, xi + 198 pp., ISBN 978-1-4411-5878-9.

Kim Ebensgaard Jensen, Aalborg University

1. Introduction

Sadly, many English departments at universities around the world are characterized by somewhat of a rift between the linguistically oriented aspects of their degree programs and the literature oriented ones. Fortunately, the English department where I work is happily free of such a problem, and its linguists and literary critics live in peace, harmony, and mutual respect. But I have witnessed and heard stories of near civil war in other English departments. In extreme cases, this rift is manifested in direct hostility between the department's linguists and its literary critics, and in many cases there is at least a lack of communication and sympathy between the two camps. This obviously has a number of unfortunate research-related and educational consequences, potentially resulting in a lack of coherence in the English degree program.

In such cases, what is needed is often a mediator-type of discipline which combines the literary and linguistic aspects of the English degree. One such discipline is stylistics, which combines literary and linguistic analysis and may indeed be seen as a discipline that captures the very spirit of philology. Peter Verdonk, Professor Emeritus of Stylistics at the University of Amsterdam, is among the most important figures in English stylistics and has always been driven by a fascination with both language and poetic literature. Throughout his long academic career, he has contributed with findings that have taken massive steps towards our understanding of the literary effects of poetic language as well as the interaction between poetry and the many contextual dimensions in which it exists. Importantly, Verdonk has always treated insights from both linguistics and literary criticism as valuable, and his work has helped bridge the gap between the two.

In 2013, Verdonk published, as part of Bloomsbury's *Advances in Stylistics* series, a volume entitled *The Stylistics of Poetry: Context, Cognition, Discourse, History*, which collects articles and papers published by Verdonk in the period from 1984 to 2010, thus spanning a great part of his career.

2. Synopsis

The volume contains eleven chapters, all of which, with the exception of the first chapter, are adaptations of articles published by Verdonk elsewhere. Save the first chapter, the chapters in the book are chronologically ordered in accordance with their original dates of publication. Although no formal grouping is made of the chapters into larger parts, the book may be divided into three major thematic sections, as it were. Chapters two to four offer stylistic analyses in a more traditional vein, while chapters five to seven primarily focus on contextual and discursive aspects of poetry and poetic language, and chapters eight to eleven primarily deal with poetry and poetic language in a cognitive perspective.

The first chapter is an introduction to the life and work of Verdonk, and to the book itself, and is written by Dan McIntyre, who is the editor of the *Advances in Stylistics* series. In this chapter, McIntyre also briefly accounts for some of the challenges faced by stylisticians of poetry. These are challenges which Verdonk has devoted his career to tackling from various angles, including discourse, semantics, pragmatics, pedagogy, cognition, history, and art – and his work has generated

numerous valuable insights and raised new questions, paving the way for important future research.

2.1. *Classic stylistics and poetry as discourse*

As mentioned above, chapters two to four are more traditionalist yet innovative and groundbreaking, which is why they are all summarized in this subsection.

Chapter two, 'Poetic artifice and literary stylistics' was originally published in 1984 and addresses some central issues in poetics, focusing on those formal features that are held to distinguish poetry from prose; the notion of poetic artifice itself is borrowed from Forrest-Thomson (1978). Tackling formal mimesis and form-function relations in poetry, the chapter offers a stylistic analysis of William Blake's poem 'London'; drawing on insights offered by Thurley (1983), Verdonk discusses the literary concepts of inwardly turned meaning and outwardly turned meaning. Focusing on the lexis, syntax, and phonology of the poem, Verdonk notes that there is an increase in intensity and foregrounding clashes and paradoxes within the three domains and takes this to reflect the intensity of Blake's indignation as the societal state of affairs in his contemporary London which the poem addresses.

The third chapter, "We have art in order that we may not perish from truth': the universe of discourse in W.H. Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts'" was originally published in 1987. While still primarily an instance of more traditional stylistic analysis, the chapter, as its title indicates, is somewhat inclined towards discourse analysis. Analyzing the style in Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts' (which Auden wrote after having visited the museum and seen Breughel's work during a short stay in Brussels in 1938) Verdonk points out that the poem is characterized by a style of understatement which, he argues, may be inspired by the painter's work. Verdonk's stylistic analysis addresses various rhetorical and linguistic elements and structures establishing the persona's understating style. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the analysis, however, is Verdonk's analysis of the deictic and thematic structure of the poem.

The fourth chapter is entitled 'Who are the performers of Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth?'' and was originally published in article form in 1988. While traditional analyses tend to focus on the phonological aspects of 'Anthem for a Doomed Youth', Verdonk is more interested in the discursive aspects of the poem. More specifically, Verdonk addresses the implied interlocutors in the poem as well as various aspects of the poem's relation to its implied speech situation, drawing on Fowler's (1977: 76; see also Semino 2007) notion of 'mind style'. The notion of mind style enables Verdonk to address the line of thought of the poem's persona, as signified by stylistic features, and to address the persona's outlook and way of relating to the implied context of the poem as a piece of discourse. Among the elements of the poem's mind style addressed in the analysis are verb predicate deletion, the absence of first and second person pronouns, and a structural suppression agency.

2.2. *Poetic language, discourse, and contexts*

While context is an important element already in chapters two to four, in chapters five to seven, context takes up a central role.

Chapter five, 'The language of poetry: the application of literary stylistic theory in university teaching', is quite different from the three previous chapters. Chapter five was originally published in 1989 as a chapter in an anthology on the teaching of literature. The main context here is that of pedagogy, as Verdonk reports an experimental course he taught in

the language of poetry. The article presents three analyses by Verdonk and his students: an analysis of Philip Larkin's 'Going', an analysis of John Silkin's 'Death of a Son', and an analysis of Sylvia Plath's 'Ariel'. Verdonk applies Leech (1965) to the first poem, Widdowson (1974) to the second one, and Cluysenaar (1982) to the third one.

The sixth chapter is entitled 'Poetry and discourse: the poetics of Philip Larkin' and was originally published in 1991 as a chapter in an edited volume on literary pragmatics. Taking its starting point in Larkin (1957), Verdonk discusses the role of the reader, the context, the formal discursive structure, and the creative process of a poem and relates these to the three states of Larkin's own model of poetics. An important point in this chapter is that seeing a poem as a mode of discourse allows the analyst to address its verbal elements, not as static objects, but as components in a dynamic communicative process between the poet and the reader.

In chapter seven, 'Poetry and public life: a contextualized reading of Heaney's 'Punishment'', Verdonk addresses various discursive and contextual aspects of Seamus Heaney's 'Punishment'. The chapter is excerpted from a chapter in one of Verdonk's own monograph from 1993, and, still treating poetry as contextualized discourse, Verdonk analyzes spatial, temporal, and interpersonal deixis in the poem.

2.3. *Poetry, rhetoric, and cognition*

Whereas chapters two to seven progress towards discourse-analytical stylistics, the remaining chapters fall under the rubric of cognitive poetics and cognitive stylistics.

The eighth chapter was originally published in 1999 as an article. As its title, 'The liberation of the icon: a brief survey from classical rhetoric to cognitive stylistics', indicates, the article provides an overview of stylistics, from its roots in classical rhetoric to cognitive stylistics. A major point in this chapter is that, with the development of cognitive poetics, stylistics became an interdisciplinary framework again, as it rejected the purely formalist view inspired by Practical Criticism and New Criticism.

Chapter nine, 'Painting, poetry, parallelism: ekphrasis, stylistics and cognitive poetics' offers an analysis of William Carlos Williams' poem 'The Dance' which describes Breughel's painting *The Kermess*. Originally published in 2005 as a research article, this chapter traces the literary subgenre of ekphrasis back to its roots in classical rhetorics and also discusses the close affinity between poetry and the visual arts. A brief outline of the basics of cognitive poetics is also provided. The analysis itself focuses on the phenomenon of parallelism, which is fairly typical of traditionalist stylistics. However, Verdonk takes his analysis one step beyond traditional stylistics in that he relates his analysis to cognitive science, in particular drawing on figure-ground alignment (Rubin 1915) in Williams' description of *The Kermess*. In doing so, Verdonk establishes a link between foregrounding and parallelism via observing linguistic poetic strategies, and human cognitive structures and processes.

The next chapter, which was originally published in 2006 as an encyclopedia entry, is simply entitled 'Style'. Like chapter eight, this chapter provides a historical overview rather than offering actual stylistic analysis (although it contains elements of analysis). This chapter offers an in-depth overview of the concept of style, tracing it from its Greco-Roman early history via its role in linguistics and speech-act-theory to its current conception in cognitive poetics.

The final chapter of the volume was originally published in 2010 in an edited volume on

language and style and is entitled 'A cognitive stylistic reading of rhetorical patterns in Ted Hughes's 'Hawk Roosting': a possible role for stylistics in a literary critical controversy'. Combining insights from cognitive science with rhetorical analysis, Verdonk identifies the following rhetorical patterns in the poem: foregrounding of first person pronouns, foregrounding of present tense forms, hierarchical submission of any agent in the poem except the hawk that serves as the poem's persona, contrast between Latinate and Anglo-Saxon lexemes, and versification. As in chapter ten, Verdonk draws on figure-ground theory in creating a linkage between the poem and its cognitive context. In comparing five rather different readings of the poem to his own stylistic reading, Verdonk notes that literary analysts tend to focus on large-scale significance of the representations in literary work, while stylisticians focus on the specific relations between this significance and specific of language. The conclusion to the chapter, and thus the volume, is that stylistics and literary criticism are complementary.

3. Evaluation and discussion

The Stylistics of Poetry: Context, Cognition, Discourse, History is an interesting read in a number of ways. Firstly, it documents Verdonk's own evolution as a stylistician, which, given his importance in the field, is in itself interesting. By extension, the volume also documents the evolution of stylistics – as witnessed through the work of Verdonk, of course (for instance, there is no mention at all of the Systemic Functional Linguistics-oriented tradition of stylistics which is also quite popular). The volume is characterized by elegant analysis and language which is clear and concise, yet colorful and rather easy for even novice academics to read. The book is less than 200 pages long, and the fonts are not exactly small; still, it is astounding the amount of information and insights conveyed within it. This obviously makes reading the volume a very positive experience. Another factor in this positive experience is Verdonk's treatment of the poetic data he analyses and the way that he approaches insights and theoretical frameworks of scholars. He treats both linguistic and literary concepts with utmost respect and seamlessly shows, time and again, that the two can work together and generate extremely interesting insights into poetry. Seeing that the volume is an edited work that chronologically collects articles and book chapters, some of which bear similarities in terms of theory and method, there are some overlaps and repetitions across a few chapters. In particular, the exposés of cognitive stylistics and cognitive poetics in the last four chapters overlap significantly.

Since the volume contains the writings of just one stylistician, albeit one who holds great authority within the field, it is not recommended as the only textbook in a university course in stylistics. Most of the individual chapters within it, however, would be incredibly valuable additions to the curriculum of such a course. For instance, chapters eight and ten would be very useful in a course in cognitive stylistics with, say, Stockwell (2002) as the main reading, as they would bring a critical historical dimension into the course. Likewise, chapters nine and eleven would be perfectly suited as case studies in such a course; in particular chapter eleven with its elegant reconnection of cognitive stylistics and rhetoric. Chapters two, three, six, and seven would be very suitable in a course on stylistics more generally as examples of studies that treat poetry as discourses and stylistic analysis which draws on discourse analysis; for the same reason, I can imagine that a philologically oriented course in discourse analysis would also benefit from including one or two of those chapters as readings,

while a course in literary criticism could benefit from including a chapter or two from the volume as examples of stylistic analysis of poetry. Chapters two and nine would, of course, also be suitable for a course in ekphrasis as a literary figure, with chapter two exemplifying the influence of visual art upon verbal art and chapter nine setting up a relation between poetic description of visual art and rhetorical patterns against the backdrop of human cognition.

I think that stylisticians, along with discourse analysts and cognitive linguists with an interest in literature, will benefit from reading this book. Firstly, it provides the stylistician with a wealth of valuable insights into the discursive and cognitive aspects of poetic language, and Verdonk's own contributions to both discursive stylistics and cognitive stylistics are now available to the stylistician in one concise and easily accessible volume. Secondly, the discourse analyst will find that many of the principles from his or her discipline are also applicable to the analysis of poetry, and, perhaps more importantly, that application of these may result in new understandings of poetry as discourse. Thirdly, a cognitive linguist, such as myself, will not only find that the brief exposés of cognitive stylistics serve as very useful entry points into cognitive stylistics, but also that application of cognitive science in the analysis of poetic language casts light on both poetic language in its cognitive function and the wealth of creative potential that resides in human cognition. Moreover, linguists and literary critics who are simply interested in each other's work should read the volume simply because of the way it bridges the gap between linguistics and literary criticism in a way that respects, appreciates, and validates the work on both sides of the gap.

References

- Cluysenaar, Anne (1982). 'Formal meanings in three modern poems'. *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters*, 12(4): 302-230.
- Forrest-Thomson, Veronica (1978). *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Fowler, Roger (1977). *Linguistics and the Novel*. London: Methuen.
- Larkin, Philip (1957). 'The pleasure principle'. *Listen II*. London: Marvell Press.
- Leech, Geoffrey (1965). 'This bread I break: language and interpretation'. *Review of English Literature*, 6: 119-128.
- Rubin, Edgar (1915). *Synsoplevede Figurer*. Copenhagen: Den Gyldendalske Boghandel.
- Semino, Elena (2007). 'Mind Style 25 years on'. *Style*, 41(2): 153-203.
- Stokwell, Peter (2002). *Cognitive Poetics*. London: Routledge.
- Thurley, Geoffrey (1983). *Counter-Modernism in Current Critical Theory*. London: Macmillan.
- Widdowson, Henry G. (1974). 'Stylistics'. In Stephen Pit Corder & John Patrick Brierley Allen (eds.), *The Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 202-231.