

ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

32/3 2023

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Anglica An International Journal of English Studies

ISSN 0860-5734

www.anglica-journal.com

DOI: 10.7311/Anglica/32.3

Publisher:

Institute of English Studies University of Warsaw

ul. Dobra 55

00-312 Warszawa

Nakład: 30 egz.

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Typesetting:

Tomasz Gut

Cover design:

Tomasz Gut

Printing and binding:

Sowa – Druk na życzenie

www.sowadruk.pl

+48 22 431 81 40

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Brand New Oldies: Recent English Narrative Verse

Abstract: A substantial amount of narrative verse has been written and published in England in the first two decades of the 21st century. Several writers, including Bernardine Evaristo, Ros Barber, Patience Agbabi, and Moniza Alvi, have written successful and well-received longer narrative poems. These poems fall into various categories: novel in poems, verse novel, and narrative collection. Five features of these texts are distinguished: the reworking of traditional and popular story materials; the predominant deployment of traditional narrative and narrational technique; accessible verse technique; an interest in past subjects and an attempt to render them available to a contemporary readership; and an adoption of non-narrative and lyric modes.

Keywords: 21st-century English poetry, narrative verse, novel in poems, verse novel.

1. Introduction

The thesis advanced in this essay is that there has been a resurgence of narrative verse, and, particularly, longer narrative verse, in the early 21st century in England, and that this phenomenon has not been widely discussed. Further, I argue that the narrative verse of these two decades has been marked by five features. These are: the reworking of traditional and popular story materials; the predominant deployment of traditional narrative and narrational technique; a related favouring of accessible verse technique; an interest in subjects from the historical past and an attempt to render them readily available to a contemporary readership; and a surprising adoption of non-narrative modes. The underlying element in most of these features is what can broadly be understood as accessibility – of story material and technique. The tendency to deploy the non-narrative within narrative is a phenomenon that needs further and contextualizing discussion.

Texts chosen for detailed analysis are: Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* (2001); Glyn Maxwell's *The Sugar Mile* (2005); Ros Barber's *The Marlowe Papers* (2012); Moniza Alvi's *At the Time of Partition* (2013); Kate (Kae) Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* (2013); Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* (2014); and Lavinia Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow* (2014). Other relevant texts referred to briefly include: Fred D'Aguiar's *Blood Lines* (2000); Caroline Bergvall's *Meddle English* (2011); Alice Oswald's *Memorial* (2011); Ian McMillan's *The Tale of Walter the Pencil Man* (2013); and Jay Bernard's *Surge* (2019). I will forego detailed notes on the authors, as details of their careers are widely available. But it should be noted that most of these texts are written by well-known poets. Barber is primarily an academic, but Evaristo is a successful poet and novelist, and Maxwell is a prolific poet and playwright. Alvi, Agbabi, Tempest (a playwright too), and Greenlaw have also won wide recognition for their verse. Narrative texts referred to in passing – by D'Aguiar, Bergvall, Oswald, McMillan, and Bernard – are all by prominent contemporary English poets. The choice of my principal corpus of texts is motivated by diversity of authorship, subject matter, and technique, although the points of convergence among these texts, despite differences, are striking.

My article is divided into seven sections. In the first, I offer a definition of longer narrative poetry, indicate briefly the long tradition of the category, and point to the relative critical neglect of recent narrative verse. In five subsequent sections, I discuss each of the features of recent narrative verse set out in my thesis. A final section draws conclusions from the previous discussion and suggests lines of further research.

2. Narrative Poetry: Definition and History

Most writers on narrative verse take the term for granted, and do not attempt to define it. However, one can offer a brief definition. Gérard Genette defines narrative as “une production linguistique assumant la relation d'un ou plusieurs événement(s) [...] l'expansion d'un verbe” / “a linguistic product taking on itself the relation of one or several events [...] the expansion of a verb” (19). On the other hand, Franz K. Stanzel insists on the centrality of mediation to any narrative. For him, “die Mittelbarkeit des Erzählens” is narrative's defining feature (15). H. Porter Abbott suggests the former is crucial, while he points out that the latter does not embrace the narrative in, for example, films, or works of visual art (2008, 13–15). With regard to narrative verse, it should also be noted that many ballads (narrative poems *par excellence*) have a narrative strategy that employs unmediated dramatic dialogue. Although I see mediation as an important aspect of many narratives, I concur with Abbott's position.

A narrative poem is one that recounts an event or events, as opposed to presenting states or argument, although the definition of event and attendant narrativity is a complex aspect of narratological analysis. Abbott makes it clear that the presence

of an event is necessary for a narrative to be seen as such. He is, however, reluctant to define an event, although he gives examples (2008, 13). He insists that narrativity is complex but is a matter of degree (2008, 25). Event and narrativity are discussed in great and illuminating detail by Peter Hühn and Abbott in the relevant entries in the *Living Handbook of Narratology* published online by Hamburg University. I operate in my essay with the following rough definition of event and narrativity, which is germane to my analysis of my selected texts. An event entails a verb and a change of state, physical or emotional. Narrativity involves the linking of events in sequence, temporal or causal, to generate some kind of story, however skeletal. By scholarly consensus, event and narrativity are attenuated in lyric utterances, descriptions, or discursive commentary (Abbott 2011). Dramatic texts, on the other hand, are certainly eventful, but are usually not mediated by narration. This understanding is a simple one, but it serves my purposes in the essay.

My concern in the following essay is with longer narrative verse. This description also needs to be glossed. This is especially so as I argue below, as Eva Müller-Zettlemann does (238–240), that all lyric poems contain or imply narrative. Longer is clearly a relative term, as is, in another context, short story. I suggest that literary categories are best understood as existing on a continuum. A brief poem is usually a page long or much less; John Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Anne Stevenson's *Correspondences* are much longer. The poems I discuss are nearer the longer end of the spectrum, which is not to say that much shorter poems do not also contain clear narrative elements.

Narrative verse is an old category of literary text. Abbott suggests that the majority of narratives in human history has been in verse (2011). The antiquity of narrative verse, even only within English-language literature, is evident. The limits of this essay do not permit a detailed history of the category. I use the term category because I do not think narrative verse is a genre (in any strict sense, as a sonnet, crime story, or perhaps *film noir* are) or a mode (as a large class like the dramatic is); it is, however, clearly a category of text that can be distinguished, and is distinguished, among others. I can do no more than indicate the depth of the phenomenon. Chaucer's tales, the medieval *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and popular ballads are central elements of the canon of English literature, as is John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) and Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712/1714) are long narrative poems, as is Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). In the 19th century, prominent examples of narrative verse are as varied as and as important as Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859), George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862), Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868–1869), and Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898). These are all very different poems – romance, *fabliau*, supernatural tale, beast fable, heroic epic, political satire, mock-heroic, psychological crime story, a dissection of a collapsing marriage, ballad – but they are all longer narrative poems.

Throughout the 20th century, narrative verse is present in English literature in major texts. Central canonical texts are examples of modernist narrative poetry: for example, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and David Jones's *In Parenthesis* (1937). In the later part of the century, narrative poems form an important although often under-discussed aspect of literary history. For example, one of the finest Anglo-American poems of the 20th century, Anne Stevenson's *Correspondences* (1974), is a narrative poem, a feminist rewriting of US history in epistolary form. Narrative passages are central to Christopher Logue's *War Music* (1962–2005/2015). James Fenton's output is full of narrative poems (*inter alia*, "The Milkfish Gatherers," "Out of the East," "The Ballad of the Shrieking Man," but there are many others). These are only a few examples among many. The extensive tradition of narrative verse in English is acknowledged by Hermann Fischer (*passim*) and Catherine Addison. The latter states that "[t]he verse novel [the type of narrative verse on which she focuses] [...] was actually quite old [by the 1990s]. It had not even undergone a period of dormancy" (2). In the first decades of the 21st century, longer narrative verse has a long history.

However, recent narrative verse is underdiscussed by commentators on modern and contemporary poetry. This is the case with otherwise thorough and insightful monographic studies by Fiona Tolan (2010), Nerys Williams (2011), and David Kennedy and Christine Kennedy (2013). It is also the case with important and scholarly surveys of relevant fields. Erik Martiny's *Companion to Poetic Genre* (2012) does contain one illuminating and relevant essay, Romana Huk's on the ballad, but nothing else specifically focused on narrative verse as such (117–138). Wolfgang Görttschacher and David Malcolm's *A Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Poetry, 1960–2015* (2021), although several of its essays discuss narrative poems, does not look at the category of narrative verse specifically. A similar silence can be noted in Neil Corcoran's *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry* (2007) and Edward Larrisey's *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945–2010* (2016). If these companion volumes can be taken as demonstrating a critical consensus at the time of their publication, and I suggest that they do, narrative verse, as such, plays little part in that.

One influential anthology of late 20th-century English poetry indicates that recent narrative verse is important. Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion in the "Introduction" to their *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982) suggest that one feature of the "decisive" change in "sensibility" that their anthology claims to document is a deployment of "the art of narrative." They acknowledge that this is "not so much a new element in poetry as an isolation and re-emphasis of a time-honoured one" (11, 18–19). For them, an innovatory quality of such verse lies in the deliberate inconclusiveness of some of these narrative poems and an emphasis on the artifice of storytelling (19). Their anthology also includes several texts by Douglas Dunn, Derek Mahon, Tony Harrison, Carol Rumens, and others, that clearly have marked narrative elements. Indeed, Paul

Muldoon's "Immram" is a relatively long narrative piece (144–152). However, I am not aware of any scholarly work that explicitly addresses the narrative verse of the poets included in this anthology. Over twenty-five years later, James Byrne and Claire Pollard's anthology *Voice Recognition: 21 Poets for the 21st Century* (2009) similarly includes several narrative poems by Emily Berry, Siddharta Bose, Joe Dunthorne, Sandeep Parmar, and others, but barely mentions this aspect of the poems in their selection.

Nor do narratologists usually discuss narrative verse. Genette, Stanzel, and Abbott do not discuss poetry at all in their far-ranging studies of narrative. Indeed, Müller-Zetzelmann argues that "[p]oetry is one of the few literary modes perceived to be situated outside the ever-widening narrative realm" (232, 233–236). A glance at the topics considered in James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz's *A Companion to Narrative Theory* confirms this observation. Part IV of this collection considers narrative in law, cinema, opera, music, and performance, but not in poetry (413–512). In an essay entitled "The Unnaturalness of Narrative Poetry," Brian McHale does something to combat this occlusion, while noting how it has been the norm within narratological studies (199–222). A major exception to this neglect lies in recent work by Peter Hühn and those scholars connected with him. However, Jörg Schönert, Hühn and Malte Stein certainly acknowledge the innovative nature of their undertaking in bringing the study of narrative to poetry (1). A more recent (although self-limiting) endeavour to relate narratological concepts to the analysis and study of lyric verse is Hühn's *Facing Loss and Death: Narrative and Eventfulness in Lyric Poetry* (2016). This neglect is discussed at greater length by David Malcolm (2018).

The indifference to verse narrative is surprising if for no other reason than that lyric verse always contains or implies narrative elements. Thus, any list of poets practicing narrative in the 20th century would be extensive. The narrative aspects of lyric verse are emphasized by Jochen Petzold (225). Müller-Zetzelmann discusses the ellipses, the lyric *histoire*, as she defines it, that are implied by any lyric poem. She goes on to argue that an analysis of the basic narratological story-discourse distinction would be of great use to those who discuss poetry (238–240, 244). The highly functional intersection of the narrative and the lyric is discussed at some length by Schönert, Hühn, and Stein (2007, 3), by Hühn (with contributions by Britta Goerke, Halina du Plooy, and Stefan Schenk-Haupt) (2016), by McHale (199–222), and by Malcolm (67–79).

However, longer narrative verse has recently provoked some theoretical discussion. For example, Ines Detmers points to the "Entinstitutionalisierung" (the deinstitutionalization) of the mixture of mode and genre, and the "gattungstransgressiv" (genre-transgressive) nature of the category (185, 190–191). Narrative verse is disturbing because it disturbs well-established distinctions between narrative and lyric, poetry and prose, and poem and novel. Important work in this field has been done by Henrieke Stahl, who distinguishes (along a spectrum of configurations

of longer narrative verse) among a collection of poems, a poem cycle, a novel in poems (Glyn Maxwell's *The Sugar Mile* [2005]), and a verse novel (Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* [1986]). In the first two categories, the degree of thematic connection among parts is high, and though the poem cycle contains poems closely related thematically, in setting, and figures, any overarching narrative *histoire* (a plot, in Stahl's terms) is absent. A novel in poems, however, while maintaining a narrative arc, consists of relatively discrete, potentially autonomous poems with varying voices and points of view. Stevenson's *Correspondences* is another good example here. A verse novel, on the other hand, is marked by narrative coherence and consistent verse form and by unified narrational perspective (Stahl 90, 91). Besides Seth's well-known text, Fred D'Aguiar's *Blood Lines* (2000) is an example. Stahl suggests that recent writing in English about narrative verse occludes distinctions among types of that verse (90). This is not entirely true. Joy Alexander notes "the vexed question of distinguishing between a novel told in verse and a series of poems linked in narrative sequence" (270), without, however, trying to resolve the issue. It must be noted, however, that there is a tendency to collapse possible distinctions among narrative verse, the novel in poems, and a verse novel. Narrative verse is surely a larger category of which the novel in poems and the verse novel are sub-categories. That is the understanding with which I operate in this essay.

Nonetheless, contemporary narrative verse, however under-theorized, especially in its manifestation as a verse novel or novel in verse, has certainly drawn the attention of several recent commentators. Alexander discusses it in her essay "The Verse-novel: A New Genre" (2005), Catherine Addison addresses it in *A Genealogy of the Verse Novel* (2017), and it is the subject of Adrian Kempton's *The Verse Novel in English: Origins, Growth and Expansion* (2018). However, Stahl is correct that these studies are largely indifferent to distinctions among various categories of narrative verse, and indifferent to questions of technique, and tend, as their titles indicate, to class all as verse-novel. In my discussion below, I reverse this approach. My subject is narrative verse, verse marked by a high degree of narrativity and eventfulness, as I indicated above. But distinctions can be made. Some longer narrative poems are closer to novels than others. Moniza Alvi's *At the Time of Partition*, while it does give a coherent narrative, is closer to a highly unified collection of poems. Maxwell's *The Sugar Mile* is, in Stahl's convincing terms, a novel in poems. The same is true of Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow*. Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* and Ros Barber's *The Marlowe Papers* are verse novels, while Kate (Kae) Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* is, because of its brevity, similar to a short story in verse, a form that all the narratives in Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* fit within.

But whatever distinctions are to be made, longer narrative verse, in broad terms, has enjoyed a resurgence in the early 21st century in England. Here I list some important authors and titles: Fred D'Aguiar, *Blood Lines* (2000); Bernardine Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) and *Lara* (2009); Glyn Maxwell, *The Sugar*

Mile (2005); Caroline Bergvall, *Meddle English* (2011); Alice Oswald, *Memorial* (2011); Ros Barber, *The Marlowe Papers* (2012); Ian McMillan, *The Tale of Walter the Pencil Man* (2013); Moniza Alvi, *At the Time of Partition* (2013); Kate (Kae) Tempest, *Brand New Ancients* (2013); Patience Agbabi, *Telling Tales* (2014); and Lavinia Greenlaw, *A Double Sorrow* (2014). One could include other texts: Maxwell's *Time's Fool* (2000) and Bergvall's *Drift* (2014) for example. Jay Bernard's recent *Surge* (2019) is relevant. Robin Robertson's *The Long Take* (2018) would be relevant (after all, it is published by an English publisher), but Robinson's Scottish origins mean that I must leave his verse narrative out of consideration. Craig Raine's *History: The Home Movie* (1994) is only a few years outside the time parameters of this essay. In what follows I analyse texts by Evaristo, Maxwell, Barber, Alvi, Tempest, Agbabi, and Greenlaw. My choice is partly subjective: these seem to me among the most accomplished examples of the category of longer narrative verse. The texts chosen also illustrate a wide range of narrative types and strategies. They also turn out to have a surprising amount in common.

3. Traditional and Popular Story Materials

The narrative poems under discussion predominantly rework popular and traditional story materials. Such adaptation is evident in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*. Spunky young Zuleika grows up in an African immigrant family on the mean streets of Londinium. The lovely, saucy girl of humble background catches the attention of a repellent rich older man. He marries her, enriches her family, sexually abuses her, and tries to control her. She draws the attention of an even more important figure and becomes the Emperor's mistress. He dies. Her husband poisons her. Nothing is left of her, not even a memory (236) until, that is, Evaristo brings her back. The story material's moves are unashamedly melodramatic and colourful.

Tempest, too, produces a popular narrative in *Brand New Ancients*, and one that, further, possesses a traditional orientation. The story material, eventful to a marked degree, involves a marriage that has fallen into boredom, an affair, domestic violence, a child brought up by someone not his father, remorse, drunkenness, two boys (Clive and Terry) growing up in neglect and falling into delinquency. Tommy, the child of Jane's fling with Brian, grows up a talented artist. He falls in love with the lovely and sensible Gloria who pulls pints at the local pub. Tommy prostitutes his talent for a lot of money working for an advertising firm in the City. He drifts away from Gloria, only to realize that he loves her. Clive and Terry, by now hardened louts, try to rape Gloria. She fights back and saves herself. Tommy sees it all. They are together. Brian, lonely and abandoned by all the women in his life, goes to Thailand, maintains a Thai child lover, and then dies.

The story material is drawn from television soap opera, the BBC's *EastEnders*, for example. Characters are mostly lower-class with every-person lower-class

English names like Kevin, Terry, or Gloria. They hold unglamorous jobs in a supermarket, a bar, or at an airport. The place setting is never specified, but one must assume it is London. When Tommy moves upwards into the City, he feels unhappy; he does not belong there, despite his success. But the story is traditional too, for these characters are Tempest's brand new ancients. The speaker/narrator (who can be identified with Tempest) constantly relates her characters to figures from classical mythology. Jane is Pandora (11); Mary is Medea at a supermarket checkout (13). Tommy is Dionysus (27); Terry is a minotaur (36). Gloria in her rage against her attackers, is one of Zeus's daughters (40) and she defends herself "like a heroine, a god" (42). Brian's South-East Asian country is even called an "Olympus" (46). In the opening seven pages of the text, the narrator insists that the gods and heroes are here with us in the modern city. "The Gods are all here / Because the Gods are in us," she declares (5).

Agbabi's *Telling Tales* is a reworking of the traditional and canonical narratives of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It transposes Chaucer's romances, morality tales, beast fables, and *fabliaux* to contemporary and metropolitan Britain. The pilgrims are on a bus travelling from London to Canterbury. The MC, Harry Bailey, organizes a story-telling competition. What we have is the transcription of a recording (1–2). A list of author biographies (invented) is given at the book's end (115–120). They are all denizens of the contemporary London writing and performance scene, although they may come from far-flung parts of the world and are a truly international body of performers. The text marks the stages of their journey, the performers, and the Chaucer tale that each reworks. Helen Ivory calls the text "a vibrant reboot" (99), and Rory Waterman describes it as "for and about twenty-first-century – a fast-paced, modern equivalent with a contemporary cast" (23). It, too, combines the popular and the traditional.

Like Tempest's text, Agbabi's is narrative driven, full of events. This can at times achieve a dizzying effect, as in "Tit for Tat" (11–14). This tale is sexually explicit and deals in drugs and promiscuous fornication and cunning tricks played on others (it retells "The Reeve's Tale"). Indeed, this is largely the story materials of the tales in their rebooted versions. Much of this derives from Chaucer, but the degree of wild coupling, violence, drug consumption, carnivalesque abjection, and duping others in Agbabi's *Telling Tales* offers a particular version of contemporary Britain, one guaranteed to interest a young and contemporary audience. All the new Canterbury Tales are collapsed into *fabliaux*. Even the lowliest of Chaucerian tales usually carries some kind of moral. That is not the case here. The tales are "authentic / cos we're keeping it real," declares the MC at the start of the bus journey (2), a point that he repeats at its end (113). The poem's last line is "all that's written is written to inspire us" (113). Not everyone would agree. For example, Lyndon Davies acknowledges that Agbabi's versions of Chaucer may appeal to some: "She revels in the grimy side of life, in the lingo of street-lore,

drug-dealing, sex and violence and I think teenagers might enjoy her big garish colours and saucy mouth” (64). But Davies continues, Agbabi’s sources, for good or bad, may be *EastEnders* and *Big Brother* rather than Chaucer. For Sohini Basak, the reviewer of *Telling Tales* in *Wasafiri*, it is “an example of how contemporary poets can create a new audience for their work” (81).

In *A Double Sorrow*, Greenlaw retells one of the most familiar narratives in European literature, that of the lovers Troilus and Cressida (spellings of the female protagonist’s name are various), whose unhappy fates are played out against the background of the Trojan War. Greenlaw sets out some of her sources in an introduction: Chaucer, above all, but also Boccaccio and the unacknowledged earlier sources from which they draw (x–xi). Further, she marks the sources of specific passages in the text, giving book and line numbers to Chaucer’s text and to Boccaccio’s. (Robert Henryson’s powerful 15th-century retelling in Scots, *The Testament of Cresseid*, is not mentioned.) Thus, the story material is a familiar one and Greenlaw sticks to its received outlines, although her rendition of the story, which I discuss below, is innovative.

Maxwell in *The Sugar Mile*, Barber in *The Marlowe Papers* and Alvi in *At the Time of Partition* do not rework traditional story materials. However, one can scarcely exaggerate the presence of Maxwell’s subject (the bombing of London in 1940 and 1941) in the British popular imagination (Gardiner 2004, 689; Calder, *passim*). Further, the premise of Barber’s poem – Christopher Marlowe did not die in 1593, but lived to write plays for a cat’s-paw nonentity called William Shakespeare – also has some popular resonance, as is witnessed by the film *Anonymous* (2011). Similarly, the story of a family in time of war and, indeed, the subject of the Partition of India in 1947 have echoes in popular culture, for example in the TV series *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984), although Alvi writes of that set of events from a different, although not entirely different, perspective.

4. Narrative and Narration

Narrative and narrational technique are traditional in most of the poems under discussion. In Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe*, the story material is presented in a logical chronological sequence, with only minor analepses to present Zuleika’s parents’ journey from Africa to Londinium. Zuleika is the narrator throughout and her account is never questioned or rendered problematic. The text aims at maximum accessibility to its readers. The same is true of Barber’s *The Marlowe Papers*. The narrative is not entirely chronological and linear, but mixes passages before and after Marlowe’s feigned death and disappearance (approximately the first 40 pages). These are, however, clearly marked, and the narrative does, indeed, break down into two long chronologically coherent sequences. The first 200 pages are mostly devoted to the period before Marlowe’s feigned death and escape from

England, while the remaining 200 pages (approximately) deal with events after that. Temporal signposts are clear. The narrative, however, comes to no closure. It stops sometime in the early 1600s with many Marlovian plays still to come. It seems that Marlowe has finally accepted his hidden and obscure life, at least for the present, although if he is waiting for rehabilitation under a new king, he will be disappointed. Narration, too, is straightforward. Marlowe is the narrator. Other characters speak only in the dialogue he records or in letters he reproduces. Once again, the text is strikingly accessible.

Tempest organizes her narrative and shapes its narration like a 19th-century realist novelist. The narrative is chronological, eventful, and comes to two points of closure. The narrator is omniscient and intervening in the manner of a classic high Victorian fiction. The omniscient sections of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853–1854) offer a good example. "The Gods are all here," the narrator tells us. She elaborates:

The gods are in the betting shops
the gods are in the caff
the gods are smoking fags out the back
the gods are in the office blocks
the gods are at their desks
the gods are sick of always giving more and getting less
the gods are at the rave -
two pills deep into dancing [...] (5)

For all its eventfulness and diversity of speakers, Agbabi's rewritten *Canterbury Tales* is similarly traditional and accessible. The competing narrators recount their tales in logical and chronological sequences. They come to points of closure. They act of story-telling is not problematized in any way. One example among many comes from "Tit for Tat," a retelling of "The Reeve's Tale" (11–14). The climax and closure of the tale is farcical, but coherently narrated (although the narrator is a dog). The wife of the cuckolded Psycho

strikes down on what she thinks is Jen,
and hits her husband! Jen and Al
grab dope, the space cakes, t-shirts, jeans
and me – I leave a parting growl –
and run through site, au naturel,
to tent to tell our saga of
free food, free dope, free cakes, free love. (14)

More problematic narratives and narrational strategies are found in Maxwell's *The Sugar Mile* and Alvi's *At the Time of Partition*. *The Sugar Mile* has two central

story materials. One is an account of the 1940 bombing of an industrial area in London, the Sugar Mile of Tate and Lyle sugar warehouses. The other is set in a New York bar a few days before the 2001 attack on Manhattan. A third and minor narrative recounts a major shipping accident on the Thames in 1878 involving the sinking of a pleasure boat and the deaths of hundreds of passengers. All narratives either directly (1940 and 1878) or through implication (2001) entail very large civilian casualties and substantial destruction. The text moves between its two main settings, 2001 and 1940, from the beginning. The connection between the two times is the person of Joey, an Englishman in the New York bar, who is a survivor of the 1940 bombings in London. An English poet, Glenn, writes down, it appears, what Joey tells him, although there must be a very large measure of imaginative reconstruction in the text. There is certainly editing. Pages 3–4 is a first draft of page 139. Page 122, perhaps Glenn's notes, perhaps something else, has corrections marked.

Certainly, various voices concatenate and intersect in 2001 and 1940; various points of view interweave. Some have names: Raul the barman in New York; Granny May in 1940; members of the Pray family in 1940. But there are also an unnamed Warden, a Home Guard soldier, a bus driver. There is a degree of confusion about the voices in both the 2001 and 1940 sections. It is not always entirely clear who is talking and who is related to whom (or, indeed, exactly what they are talking about, current actuality, memory, or imagined events). That is surely deliberate on Maxwell's part, especially in the 1940 part of the narrative. These are people displaced, traumatized, and confused, whom Alison Brackenbury calls "Blitz ghosts" (83). It is also clear that in this text any account of the past is in some measure an imaginative reconstruction. Alvi's *At the Time of Partition* also problematizes the act of narrative. The text is largely organized in a logical and chronological sequence, but an important topic in the text involves the narrator/poet herself. She chooses to tell "the family story" (9). She tries to put herself in her grandmother's place (14), but must acknowledge when and where she must invent (27, 39). In fact, her doubts about her telling this story recur throughout. Is the story "there for the taking"?; is it hers for the taking (9)? Is she being presumptuous in telling it (52)? "How to arrive at one overarching story?" she asks herself of Partition (8). In the end, almost with relief, she returns "the unending story / To itself" (63).

Greenlaw's version of *Troilus and Criseyde* is complex in narrative and narrational terms. The text has an omniscient narrator who in a logical and chronological manner recounts events or gives characters' thoughts, feelings, and words. See, for example, the presentation of Calchas's thoughts and actions (8). See, also, the account of Troilus's reawakened spirits in his love for Criseyde (99), or that of Criseyde's fears in her isolation and abandonment (184, 185). See, too, the accounts of battle that bring the text close to an end (214, 215). But other voices speak directly to the reader: Pandarus (98) (he is addressing Troilus, but his utterance is unmediated); Troilus (150, 179, 201); and Criseyde (95, 139, 208). It must be

emphasized that these are all unmediated utterances, either directly addressed to another character or part of an internal debate. Thus, the narrative has prominent dramatic elements. But the most striking aspect of Greenlaw's retelling is a formal one. The text consists of nearly two hundred seven-line passages, printed as separate poems on separate pages. It is, however, difficult to imagine these poems being published separately, independently of some kind of narrative context. The text is fragmentary to a marked degree. Indeed, narrational or authorial or editorial paratexts, printed at the bottom of many pages, are often necessary to make it clear to the reader who is doing or saying what and to whom. Ellipses recur throughout. The act of retelling and the partial and fictive nature of the narrative is, thus, foregrounded.

5. Verse Technique

The technical aspects of the verse in the texts discussed are often traditional and aim to make texts readily accessible to readers. In Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* the metrical base of the poem is a free verse line that ranges in syllables per line and in main stresses per line, but mostly has around ten syllables and three to four main stresses. This is a line that is, in this configuration, close to rhythmic prose. In an interview, Evaristo says that she is proud of the fact that the verse does not interfere with reading the text (Valdivieso 10). But several sections have much shorter lines with fewer main stresses (22–26, 107–108, 184, 236). These sections are often less narrative than lyrical utterances. Technically the entire poem presents a familiar configuration of early 21st century lyric verse in English.

In *The Marlowe Papers*, the main verse technique employed by Barber is a traditional and familiar ten-syllable blank verse line, which has a basic iambic skeleton, although not by any means always. For example, Marlowe starts his narration with the following:

Church-dead. And not a headstone in my name.
No brassy plaque, no monument, no tomb,
no whittled initials on a makeshift cross,
no pile of stones upon a mountain top. (1)

The first line has five main stresses, but is not iambic – rather it runs: spondee, iamb, amphibrach, anapaest. Line 2 runs: diamb, second paeon, iamb. Line 3 runs: two amphibrachs, third paeon, single stress. Line 4 runs: two iambs, and possibly a six-syllable foot that is scanned xxx/x/. Barber employs this line throughout the text. There is occasional rhyme, usually at the end of a verse paragraph. For example,

And so, I leave my former name behind.
Gone on the Deptford tide, the whole world blind. (2)

Such rhyming is a concluding and conclusive device familiar from Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Equally familiar is Marlowe's (and Barber's) deployment of sonnet form, with a relaxed use of rhyme (2, 228, 268, 309, 327). The lines are ten-syllable ones here too, as they are in passages consisting of rhyming quatrains (for example, 118, 134, 193, 321). The verse has received praise, with Laurie Smith noting that "Barber has developed an excellent narrative medium" (64). Such a comment and Evaristo's remark quoted above suggest that the verse does not get in the way of the comprehensibility of the text's narrative.

Alvi's verse in *At the Time of Partition* is equally accessible and familiar: short two- or three-syllable lines, free verse. It is the standard line of much late 20th- and early 21st-century lyric verse (here, of course, employed in a narrative). It is intimate and conversational, as befits the text's domestic and familial perspective on history. It is accessible and moving in equal measure. It is certainly not self-advertising and demanding, but tells its story with tact and modesty.

Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* is intended to be a performance piece. "This poem was written to be read aloud," declares the author in a paratext on a title page (n.p.). As in Evaristo's and Barber's texts, Tempest's verse is of an accessible kind, at least to a certain younger audience. The lines are of variable length. Sometimes there is rhyme, sometimes not. Many rhymes are assonantal or consonantal, and do not count as traditional full rhymes. Alliteration is frequent, to give a phonic force to an utterance. Anisobaric rhyme is common. It is a text for a rap performance. One short passage must stand for many:

There's always been heroes
and there's always been villains
and the stakes may have changed
but really there's no difference.
There's always been greed and heartbreak and ambition
and bravery and love and trespass and contrition [...].
The stories are there if you listen. (4)

This is very forceful and inventive verse. "Heroes" and "changed" remain unrhymed. But "villains" surprisingly rhymes with "difference." Tempest is often very inventive with rhyme, for example, "pavement" and "Ancients" (43). The syntactic parallelism, homoeoteuton ("ambition," "contrition"), consonance ("difference," "ambition," "contrition," "listen"), and alliteration ("trespass," "stories," "listen") of the remaining lines make its punchy point with vigour. The text aims at public performance and comprehensibility.

Helen Ivory calls Agbabi's *Telling Tales* "a vibrant reboot" (99) of Chaucer's texts, and Rory Waterman describes it as "for and about twenty-first-century – a fast-paced, modern equivalent with a contemporary cast" (23). The verse as varied as the cast of narrators and characters. The diversity of forms is unlike Chaucer's

consistent ten-syllable rhyming couplets (revolutionary in the late 14th century) in the source text. Thus, “The Kiss” uses eight-syllable lines rhyming aaaa (7–10). “Roving Mic” has much shorter lines and rhyme in irregular patterns (15–18). “What Do Women Like Bes” largely does not rhyme, although there are hints of assonance and consonance, and it does at times drift into rhyme (31–37). “The Makar” is composed in *rime royal* (ababbcc) although with a very free sense of rhyme (61–65). “Profit” is made up largely of unrhymed ten-syllable lines, although a rhyme is always found for the refrain of “*Cupiditas*” (70–74). Some tales are in couplets, for example, “The Gospel Truth” (109–111). However, despite variety, accessibility is a key element in the texts. One commentator has noted the texts’ rootedness in traditions of reggae, dub, and rap (Davies 63). The following stanza certainly sounds like something from a rap battle, with internal lexical repetition and persistent rhyme:

So, I got fucked; John’s a fuckwit;
 an Nick my lover, fucked to shit;
 an Abs scored hard, he’s fucking fit;
 both men were fucked by the fucked-off git. (10)

The technical strategies employed in Greenlaw’s *A Double Sorrow* and Maxwell’s *The Sugar Mile* are different. As in Alvi’s text, the technical features of Greenlaw’s verse are not ones usually associated with narrative. Her verse form, Greenlaw states in the Introduction to the text, is an adaptation of Chaucer’s *rime royal*. Although line length and number of main stresses per line are variable, there is a tendency toward ten-syllable lines, although these show wide variation in number of main stresses per line. Rhyme, in this version of *rime royal*, is usually a matter of assonance and consonance, rather than full rhyme. (Greenlaw also abandons rhyme on occasion, for example, 66, 147.) The seven-line fragments are held together by considerable phonological orchestration. It is carefully crafted verse, but it is not a narrative-centred medium. It is certainly not a transparent one. Although highly functional in evoking emotion, memory, the interwoven nature of persons and experiences, the devices call attention to themselves.

Maxwell’s *The Sugar Mile* is a demanding text requiring an attention to technical aspects of the verse that other texts in my corpus do not. The confusion and destruction of the bombing it recounts are technically enacted in the text. In the opening sections set in 2001, for example, it is really not clear where we are and who is speaking (5–9). The voices in 1940 are often fragmentary utterances cut out of and from an immediate context (for example, 20–21, where disjointed syntax and lack of punctuation reflect this). The text moves between verse and prose (104–107, 118–120), and at times becomes a congeries of disconnected words (22–23). The verse, too, is varied in organization. Over the whole poem, line length and stress pattern are diverse. The role of rhyme in Maxwell’s verse is striking. Long sections

have no apparent rhyme or phonological echoing: for example, 3–9, 20, 71, 84. Other sections are rhymed, but the rhymes and the schemes are not always traditional. For example:

And so we came to this school on Agate Street
in Canning Town, it was late

we were dead beat
a man rides by repeating *Yellow alert*

Yellow alert.
Point is, we had no right but the way I saw it

anyone had the right.
Purple alert

He goes. *You're like a rainbow* says gran
and he storms off on his bike, somebody's son. (42; original emphasis)

Consonance is used in this passage, not full rhyme, although the voice that the above quotation comes from does also use full rhyme (42–43). Maxwell often uses repetition in rhyming positions (14, 25, 40, 66). Schemes are frequently quite irregular and can vary from stanza to stanza. See, for example:

Is that the thing with the Empire? Hey I cracked it
Clint, that's how you guys
did it, you sold people shit
then kicked their ass.

There's a *US* merchant marine? You're shittin me.
Sign me up I tell you.
There's a million bucks to you
mi amigo

and meanwhile put your fucking hands up. Cool
merchant marines rule.
Catering corps I guess I'm
catering corps. (61; original emphasis)

In three stanzas, assonance echoing abab in stanza 1 shifts in stanza 2 to a pattern of no rhyme followed by bb in which two words in rhyming positions are actually repetition. If “me” in line 1 rhymes, it is with the opening word “*mi*” of line 4.

The third stanza quoted above consists of a couplet followed by two non-rhyming lines. Such disarray is highly functional and highly wrought. It accords well with a world of destruction and disorientation. But it certainly does not make for easy reading. *The Sugar Mile* is a much more demanding text (not necessarily a better text) than Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*.

6. Accessible Pasts

The majority of texts in my sample is set in the past. Even those who do not have such a setting demonstrate a close and functional relationship with the past. All show a clear aim to make the past available and accessible to contemporary readers. In Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, the setting is Londinium, a provincial capital within the Roman Empire, in the early 200s of the common era. The place setting is realized in some detail: Londinium's streets, markets, shops, wharfs, inns and clubs, housing developments. The surrounding space is wild and untamed. But Londinium is part of a wider world. The Roman military has turned its attention to savage Caledonia (a source of the main character's slaves). It is also part of a multi-national, globalized world. The narrator-protagonist Zuleika's family has come to Britannia from what is now the Sudan; the Emperor Septimus Severus hails from North Africa (and speaks an odd Latin embodied in the poem by his article-less English); Londinium teems with people from all corners of the Empire.

Like Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, Barber's *The Marlowe Papers* is a historical narrative. The setting is late Elizabethan England, London and its surroundings, the Low Countries and other parts of Continental Europe. The setting is rendered with a close attention to detail, both squalid, vigorous, and charming. The sensational story material is the stuff of historical fiction, film and TV series. Christopher Marlowe (the text's narrator) does not die in a tavern brawl in 1593. For incautious remarks on religion he is in danger from the paranoid, censorious, and repressive Tudor state, and so his friends in high places (for he has been a foreign agent for the very Elizabethan regime that now threatens him) substitute a dead body for his person, giving out that he has been stabbed. They convey him secretly abroad where he spends a decade in exile on the Continent or under an assumed identity and in hiding in England. In the meantime he continues writing for the theatre, in the cause of literature, self-expression, and to the profit of actors and theatre managements. In a cunning move to conceal Marlowe's role, the authorship of his plays is assigned to a provincial nonentity called Shakespeare. Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow* is, as a retelling of the Troilus and Criseyde material, a historical piece too. The setting is the later stages of the Trojan War and the characters fall in and out of love against the background of ancient Greek religion, politics and warfare. Clothes, artefacts and customs are of the distant past.

Maxwell's *The Sugar Mile* is set in more recent pasts: 1940, 2001, and 1878,

all linked by the large loss of civilian lives in bombings and an accident, and by persons involved in them. In *At the Time of Partition*, Alvi's subject is one of the major events of recent world history, the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 after the end of British imperial rule. Traumatic and bloody, it has shaped the fates of millions of people for decades. "*Over half a million lost their lives, / 220,000 went missing,*" notes the narrator in an aside in italics (9). Alvi has two central topics within her text. First, the narrator (whom one can identify with the author herself) recounts an accident to her uncle, who as a young boy is struck by a passing truck and has "a damaged mind" in consequence (9). In the vast movement of populations resulting from the Partition, he is further lost by the people with whom he travels from India to Pakistan. A second topic relates to the central figure of the poem, the narrator's/poet's grandmother, in charge of five children (a further one lives in Britain) who must make the decision to leave Ludhiana in India for Lahore in Pakistan. Her story involves the pains and danger of flight and migration, the displacements and violence of Partition. It also involves the complexities of finding a new home and settling down in it. Grand historical events and personal, family experiences interweave throughout the poem within the context of Partition.

The relationship of Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* and Agbabi's *Telling Tales* to the past is more ambiguous. Tempest's story of contemporary lower-class London life is brought into relation with a mythological and ancient context, as I have indicated above. Characters are seen as figures from ancient legends, and this is a central aspect of the author's intent. They are the brand new ancients of the title. Their story is both a particular and a universal one, contemporary and timeless. As one commentator indicates, the situation in Agbabi's text – a slam competition aboard a London bus *en route* to Canterbury – only makes sense in the context of the Chaucerian intertext (Davies 63). Would such a competition be possible? Why would the participants become involved in it? Thus, the past enables the contemporary texts. The stories the participants tell are all, however, firmly contemporary. Nods to the past are all paratextual – in the designation of the Chaucerian tales that contemporary narratives are modelled on (for example, the first tale "Emily" by Robert Knightley is also called "The Knight's Tale," and this strategy is followed with the other narratives) and in the marking of the various stages of the journey to Canterbury (Old Kent Road, Shooter's Hill, Dartford, and onwards to the travellers' destination).

Both Tempest's and Agbabi's texts bring the contemporary into relation with the past, Tempest through the universal archetypes underlying her characters, and Agbabi by making the textual past an enabling device for modern stories. Maxwell and Alvi put the past in a more complex relationship with the present inasmuch as both foreground the process of reconstruction of a past course of events and experiences. In *The Sugar Mile*, the two main time settings (1940 and 2001) are linked in the person of Joey, an Englishman in a bar in New York, who is a survivor of the 1940 bombings in London, and who will be close to and perhaps a victim of the

imminent September 11 attack on the US city. Through the figure of the English poet Glenn, and his notes and drafts, the process whereby the past is recounted in the present is made clear. The same is true in *At the Time of Partition*. A central topic in the text involves the narrator/poet herself. She chooses to tell “the family story” in the present (9). She tries to put herself in her grandmother’s place (14), but is frank about her inventions (27, 39). As demonstrated above, her doubts about her telling this story recur throughout.

In all the texts in my sample, however, there is a clear attempt to bring the past into the present, to make the past available to contemporary readers. Evaristo makes this aim explicit in interviews. She declares that she wishes to seize the British past and make it accessible and usable for modern Black readers (Valdivieso 18; Gunning 167). The multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan nature of her setting in *The Emperor’s Babe* is part of this intent (Gunning 165–166). Maxwell’s story in *The Sugar Mile*, also, is primarily told by lower-class Londoners, who are not ethnically homogeneous. Joey and his family are identified as foreign, either Italian or Jewish (17). Tempest, too, identifies her brand new ancients as young, urban, relatively poor, and lower class, engaged in all kinds of socially questionable activities, and dragged down by low-paid work and the trials of modern urban life (5). The story tellers and their characters in Agbabi’s *Telling Tales* are similar. Much more ethnically diverse than Tempest’s, they include Nigerians, Welsh, Geordies, Scots, West Indians, Mancunians, a writer from Zimbabwe, and several others. As commentators have noted, this is *The Canterbury Tales* designed for a young, metropolitan, cosmopolitan, and ethnically diverse context (Davies 64; Waterman 23).

It is also through language that the authors of my corpus of texts bring the past into the present. The setting of *The Emperor’s Babe* is the 200s CE, but the Londinium in it is deeply anachronistic and evidently fictional, as is noted by Bruce King (147). It contains, *inter alia*, a Copthall Avenue (92), a “take-away caff in Bond Court” (113), and a “des res postcode of EC4” (126). The language spoken is appropriately disjunctive. Severus remarks “that what Picts call *Real McCoy*, it was simply / a case of what Gauls call *déjà vu*” (141). Zuleika says of herself: “This Über-babe is Übercharged, even now. / I’m buzzing” (118). Throughout in narration and in direct speech the text contains a striking mixture of 2000’s contemporary and demotic language with usually ungrammatical dog Latin. For example, Zuleika’s father boasts that his daughter is “married to Roman nobilitas. Veritas princess.” To which Zuleika responds silently “Blah, blah, bloody-blah” (38). This linguistic *mélange* is part of the text’s humour and recurs throughout. It also serves to bring a quasi-historical Londinium, already sounding like modern London in its diversity and cosmopolitan features, close to the modern metropolis.

Characters’ language in *The Sugar Mile* is similarly demotic and contemporary. This is evident in New York, for example in Raul’s speech (8–9), “But hey you’re sitting on Joey Stone’s Own Bar Stool / so I got to believe you, right.

Him and his issues.” It is also the linguistic colouration of the London voices, for example, Robby’s words “That about tops it / really, know what I mean. Nice day, Robby? / Yeah, not bad. Got bombed to buggery. Sorry” (49). More formal language is appropriate to the current voice, for example, that of the Warden (67), but it is an exception among the lower-class voices of the bombed. The language used by the narrator and characters in *Brand New Ancients* is similarly and suitably informal and non-standard. For example, among many: “Kevin don’t see it” (7); “ain’t” (10); “he doesn’t show nobody else” (20); “she don’t want to stare long” (34); “Then he’s stood up and he’s went to the door” (35).

The language in the texts in *Telling Tales* is very varied, but it is usually demotic and contemporary too. It is often neutral, neither unduly formal nor informal (1, 57, 77). But it is often informal and non-standard, for example: “don’t” (instead of doesn’t) (5), “My husband’s old an crap in bed” (7); “off her tits, / *Gimmegrassor-dieyoushits!*” (11); “use ta be one” (41); “for his own bod” and “too many bevvies” (91). There are several other examples. There is also a range of dialects: Tyneside (21–27); Nigerian English (31–37); Welsh-English (38–40); and Slavic (perhaps Polish) article-less English (105–106). One tale consists almost entirely of the titles of pieces of popular music (49–53). Another tale is written (and recited?) in text messages with the abbreviations and symbols widely used with that kind of text (88–90). The linguistic situation on the bus is very fluid, but all is vibrantly contemporary and predominantly highly informal, what Karen McCarthy-Woolf sees as part of a “democratic poetics” (52). Linguistically Barber’s *The Marlowe Papers* and Alvi’s *At the Time of Partition* are not demotic and informal in the same way as the texts discussed above. Alvi’s narrative is written, however, in a largely neutral language, neither formal nor informal, but eminently accessible to a wide range of contemporary readers. However, in an Author’s Note, Barber makes explicit her linguistic anachronisms “to avoid cod Elizabethan and strike a balance between authenticity and readability” (409).

The aim of “readability,” which I wish to gloss further as accessibility and attractiveness to a contemporary audience, to bring the past into the present, is key in what I have noted above about the texts in my corpus. With regard to Evaristo’s and Agbabi’s narratives, this aim is clear. But it is also true of Tempest’s and Barber’s. In *Brand New Ancients*, there is a constant drive to make the poem accessible to a contemporary urban and young audience: the popular story material, the every-person names, the language. Even the myths and legends that Tempest chooses as points of reference are relatively well-known. The poem is also intended to be a performance piece. “This poem was written to be read aloud,” declares the author in a paratext on a title page (n.p.). In addition to its other features conducive to accessibility, *The Marlowe Papers* is furnished with a “Dramatis Personae,” guiding the reader through the large cast of characters, and extensive notes (410–438), further explaining characters and situations and grounding them in documented accounts. Despite its very complex and wide-ranging story

material – espionage, love affairs, doings of the literary world, theatrical performances, travel, illness, betrayals, brawls, gaol time, avoiding arrest and capture, being spied on by malevolent persons, sea voyages, meals in inns of various categories in various countries – the text is user-friendly.

7. Non-Narrative in Narrative

One of the most striking aspects of recent narrative verse in England is that it has substantial non-narrative elements. As I have noted above, in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, the metrical base of the poem is a free verse line that fluctuates around ten syllables and three to four main stresses. But several sections have much shorter lines with fewer main stresses (22–26, 107–108, 184, 236). These sections are often less narrative than lyrical utterances. For it is part of the text's variety and its transgressive quality that substantial parts of what is clearly a narrative poem (mediated eventfulness) are not really that. Narrativity is not entirely absent in such passages, because it cannot be, but is subordinated to expression of feeling. Zuleika likes giving lists (which are usually non-narrative or where eventfulness is attenuated). For example, she conveys the rich variety of Londinium streets thus:

[...] there were pearl-sellers
 goldsmiths, robe-makers, cloak-makers,

 cabinet-makers, embroiderers, dyers,
 tanners, workers sitting on stools outside

 or doors wide open to shops,
 money-changers lurked in doorways [...] (40)

Other examples of Zuleika's penchant for listing abound (42, 63, 74, 103–104, 105, 121, 128–129, 130, 146). Narrativity is also attenuated in a variety of ways in several passages throughout the text. For instance, one notes this in Zuleika's description of her made-up, luxuriant appearance (107–108), and in her presentation of her state of mind as she awaits her period (109). The lack of what is usually classed as event is most evident in the passages of erotic rapture, surely one of the central sections of the text, which detail the emotional intensity of Zuleika's and Severus's passion for each other. It is noteworthy that these are post-coital and although far from eventless, these events are intimate and small scale (139–150, 151–159, 160). For example:

I feel the sweep of your lash on my skin,
 for my boy slips inside himself again,

to return to his core, his composure,
and I am left rowing with his legions inside
a galley on a barren horizon,
when the battle is finally over. (159)

Emotion and unmediated lyrical utterance are dominant here. Events are small-scale or metaphors for Zuleika's sense of momentary abandonment.

In Maxwell's *The Sugar Mile*, a similar striking and disruptive aspect of the text is the juxtaposition of narrative and non-narrative passages. It is clearly a narrative poem (on the border of a verse novel and a novel in poems – see Roger Caldwell (9)), although a highly elliptical one. For example, the implied narrative, the hidden schema/script, of the September 11 attack is, as is the nature of such schemata/scripts, not narrated (Hühn and Sommer 2009, 233). The distribution of the story materials over several speakers, who, in any case, are not strictly recounting events, but rather expressing emotional states or impressions, further attenuates the degree of traditionally understood narrativity in the text. But many passages are, certainly, predominantly narrative, for example, Joey's accounts of moving through the bombed streets (78–80, 108–117). It is, however, worth noting that narrative becomes highly attenuated in many parts of the text. For example pages 3–9 consist of scene setting and general reflection. Pages 74–75 are relatively event-free imagining of a future state. Pages 86–89 consist of dialogue, interior monologue, remembering, and reflection. At times, narrative – often opaque and disjointed, as one might expect in an account of the Blitz – is displaced by reflection and emotional state. *The Sugar Mile* is disturbed at every level, in a manner that enacts the disturbances, repeated throughout history, that it presents (Caldwell 9). One of these levels is embodied in the shifts from narrative to non-narrative.

The Marlowe Papers is clearly a narrative poem and (in Stahl's terms, a verse novel) and narrative there is aplenty. The relatively long text, as I indicate above, is full of eventfulness. Sometimes events are given in past tenses (for example, 140–143), sometimes in historic present. One example can stand for many:

Hog Lane, just after two, three years ago.
After a meal of mutton and cold beer
with Thomas Nashe, I'm strolling back to work
on *Doctor Faustus* when the Devil himself
calls out behind me [...].

“Untrammelled shit.
Give me your sword,” he says to Orrell, “quick.
I'll slice his head off. Then we'll see whose brains

are bigger.” Clumsily, he wrests the sword
 from his large friend’s scabbard. Orrell shoves him off,
 annoyed to be handled. Yet eager to assist,
 he hands his yeoman friend a soldier’s blade.
 The rapier at my waist weighs half as much,
 but neither of us has experience. (79)

A great deal happens in the melee that follows. But it is striking (and appropriate, for this is poem about a playwright) how much of the narrative as a whole is taken up with dialogue (for example, 88, 112, 131). As befits a text about theatre people, substantial parts of the text are dramatic. But many are also lyric utterances. Eventfulness is attenuated and univocal, unmediated expression of feeling or general observation become dominant. Such a tendency is noted by Omar Sabbagh (156). There are many examples of this lyric quality in the text. Two must suffice. Just before the fatal affray in Hog Lane, Marlowe reflects on love and loss, on social hypocrisy and unhappiness in a chapter entitled “Soliloquy” (76–78):

What is a human being? Are we clay?
 Excrescences of light? Bright animals
 adopting gross stupidity? Or gods
 pelted in human skin, come down to play,
 create, destroy, find joy in misery?
 The moon squats on the mountains like a pearl.
 It only has to rise, and will be free. (78)

These lines are expressions of speculation not accounts of actions. Later Marlowe reflects on one of his hiding places. “If I must be imprisoned,” he declares, “let it be / in a house like this.” There follow some 13 lines of reflection and description, not event (261). Although the text is fundamentally and predominantly a narrative one, it is also in no small measure marked, in a very Elizabethan/Jacobean fashion, by the repeated presence of dramatic and lyric passages.

In keeping with its modesty of focus – for the grand events of history are seen through a family’s individual and domestic experiences – Alvi’s *At the Time of Partition* is oddly attenuated in terms of narrative event, oddly inasmuch as Partition itself was an event on a grand scale. There are passages of eventfulness: for example, a lorry strikes Athar (10–11), India is partitioned (15), ninety women jump in a well (17), and the grandmother looks for her son (42–42). She cooks:

She made paneer in her kitchen
 in their half of the house,

strained milk through a muslin bag
to separate the curd from the whey. (60)

But the text is constantly attenuated in terms of event. For example, Partition itself (a cataclysmic event) is presented not without verbs, but certainly mostly without verbs denoting change of state:

A line so delicate a sparrow might have
picked it up in its beak.

Not an artist's line, or a line of writing.

A line between birth and non-being.
A line that would mean death for so many.

The land itself at its calmest and most dignified
yielded to the line, lay still –

it didn't know what was coming. (12–13)

One further example among many is the scene of the dying man lying by the road:

Under the sparse shade
of a sparse tree
an old man lay dying
by the wayside, severed
from the moving world.
His wife fanned herself
with a tattered fan.
The grandchildren lolled.

What else was there to do

under the sparse shade
of a sparse tree,
the caravan gone? (33)

The figures are inert, the events minor; the question is what there is “to do.” The answer is nothing. In a world shaped by large-scale events, it is as if the narrator wishes to avoid event in her story. Is she distrustful of narrative? As I note above, she expresses her doubts about giving an account of the past. Certainly, at the

poem's end, she is sure it is "Time to return everyone / to themselves" (63), to free them from a narrative that she has always been hesitant of.

Surprisingly in *Brand New Ancients*, in such a narrative-centred and narrative-driven poem, there are passages that are better classed as lyric and discursive/reflective. For example, in the first seven pages of the text, the speaker makes her case that the gods and heroes are on the streets around us. She is not actually narrating events (1–7). Tommy's bliss with Gloria is relatively event-free (25) and Tempest follows it with a recurrent passage about the "brand new ancients" that are all around us (24–25), which is reflective and discursive not strictly story. Similar non-narrative passages occur throughout (26–28, 28–29, 42–43). The narrative drive of the text is impressive, but it also abounds in passages of general reflection.

Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow* is a retelling of a traditional narrative, and it, too, is undeniably a narrative text, albeit a highly elliptical one, as its seven-line sections miss out large parts of the material's *histoire*. It has a narrator who recounts events or gives characters' thoughts, feelings, and words. I have noted this aspect of the text above. But the narrative is not always event-centred. Troilus gives vent to his anguish, without a verb denoting action or change of state:

Where are her arms that last night were here?
 Where is her body where?
 Is this pillow all that's left for me to embrace?
 How can I persevere?
 Who right now stands in her presence?
 To whom right now does she listen?
 Who will speak for me right now in my absence? (177)

Criseyde does the same (203). In addition, the narrator, too, at times dispenses completely with event. Narrator becomes lyric voice here:

A place of softest snow
 A place of rise and fall
 A place of open paths
 A place of long curves
 A place of pale cloud
 A place of fine feathers
 A place without walls. (119)

The narrator does the same in other parts (47, 93). Even if these passages have verbs and events, they are secondary and peripheral ones, imagined, capturing mood and feeling, not directly related to the major events of the narrative. And in the passage from page 119 quoted above, there is zero narrativity. Thus, non-narrative elements occur in most of the narrative texts that I have chosen to discuss. Indeed, the only

one of the corpus that seems resolutely and exclusively devoted to event is Agbabi's *Telling Tales*. Her story-tellers eschew reflection, extended expression of emotion, and discursive comment. With them the story is always the thing.

8. Conclusion

The configuration of features of the texts outlined above prompts four general reflections. First, the existence of texts that combine features of the novel and verse, generating terms like "verse novel" or "novel in verse," illustrates the classic formalist principle of de-automatization on the level of mode. The bringing together of two disparate categories of text enlivens and makes fresh both the novel and verse. That such a process runs through all levels of literature and its texts is argued by Viktor Shklovsky. He writes, "[a]utomatization corrodes things, clothing, furniture, one's wife and one's fear of war. [...] And so that a sense of life may be restored, that things may be felt, so that stones may be made stony, there exists what we call art" (qtd. in Shukman and O'Toole 35). *Mutatis mutandis*, I think this principle applies at the level of mode. Yury Tynianov comments in a similar way. "The dynamics of form," he writes, "is a continual violation of automatism" (qtd. in Shukman and O'Toole 30). The transgressive and galvanizing nature of narrative verse is an important aspect of the category (Detmers 185, 190–191). Second, the existence of narrative verse in the early 21st century illustrates another formalist principle, this time one associated with the Polish scholar Ireneusz Opacki. In an essay published in 1963, Opacki argues that in any period there is a "certain hierarchy of literary genres," with a "royal genre" at its head. In the development of literature, that royal genre will inevitably affect and attract other genres (120–121). According to Opacki, this is how literature proceeds. Thus, for the purposes of this essay, and drawing on the above analyses, I suggest that the novel is a "royal" form that attracts verse towards it.

Third, the relationship of narrative verse to narrative must be researched more thoroughly than I have been able to here. Two of the texts discussed above (by Maxwell and Alvi) evince an unease with narrative, an unease that is certainly part of late 20th-century and early 21st-century fiction. But a detachment from narrative is also apparent in the presence of lyric (and dramatic) elements in all but one of the texts discussed (Agbabi's *Telling Tales*). However, this attenuation of narrative needs much more attention and a much broader perspective than I can give it here. How prominent is such a feature in the narrative verse tradition? Is it more common in some periods than others? Is it purely a 21st-century phenomenon? Such questions open up possible lines of research. Fourth, several features of contemporary narrative verse that I discuss above are designed to ensure a wide readership. These include: popular story materials; unproblematic narrative and narrational technique; verse technique; and rendering the past accessible to the present. Thus, if one looks

to the future, one can speculate that the longer narrative poem, configured thus, has a future within English poetry.

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