

**TENSIONS OF TELLING WAR STORIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
OF TWO TEXTS**

Wallie Willies, University of Potchefstroom, Vaal Triangle Campus

INTRODUCTION

Enkvist (1973) begins his work on linguistic stylistics by asking whether style exists. One of his concluding remarks, at the end of the introduction says simply “I have ... argued once again that impressions of style always arise out of comparisons” (Enkvist 1973:25).

This paper employs such a means of attempting to make a few remarks concerning stylistics: two texts, viz. *Babette* by Jeanette Ferreira (Ferreira 1995) and “Images of war in Vereeniging: T.N. Leslie’s Letters to Jane 1899-1901” edited by Johann Tempelhoff (Tempelhoff 1998) are compared, with the purpose of finding possible connections between romanticism and war. The reason for searching for such a polarised link is both defiant and analytic: defiant in that the very agency of human perception would be baffled by perceiving a style to emerge from such opposing phenomena as romance and war; and analytic in that the textual signals of such a synthesis may indeed be teased into constituent parts, the evidence of which can be made clear. But what these parts are and how they may be identified remains something of an enigma: that curious place where human contexts, human agency and textual evidence impinge on each other to give a sense of something that might be called style, but which is hopelessly elusive as objectivity. The underlying assumption that teases this paper is that the evidence of style is collectable but untrustworthy. The linguistic court and the applied linguistic court may have to take cognisance of a higher jurisdiction of psycho-social intent emanating from the pen of the writer from whom the impression called style flows. In other words, the recognition of style and the analysis of style are two very different activities, the former intuitive and even sometimes unconscious, the latter extremely conscious and purposeful in terms of addressing technical debate.

This paper does not set out to be as technically perspicacious as much as it sets out to be cogent of style. It will fail in terms of adding any significant refinement to or understanding of the jargon of stylistics. Its implicit purpose is to mystify perception so that discourses of war might be brought more sharply into relief against the backdrop of human agency in writing. Questions of intent and awareness and milieu will be raised so as to explore the issue of agency. The romanticisation of war is the central theme, and in trying to understand what this means, discourses of war will be viewed in terms of poetic possibility.

The two texts to be compared have been chosen for a number of practical reasons: I edited the language of “Images of War” in preparation for its publication and translated “Babette” at the author’s request, for its publication in English. Then, of course, both these texts centre on the 1899-1901 Anglo-Boer War.

A SCHEMA FOR RELATIVISING STYLISTICS

A quick, ambitious attempt to schematise a flow between micro- and macro-stylistics shows that human agency necessarily recognises these two reflections: micro-stylistics textually, and macro-stylistics experientially and phenomenologically (see figure 1). These are reflections of each other, since textuality, and the content and shape of consciousness are mutually impinging influences. What is important to notice is that individual and social consciousness have been problematised in the schema, so as to blur the monad of individualism and to relegate the mystic majesty of Comte’s “society” to where it belongs, i.e. to the pre-articulated world of confusing experience, where war is not a thing, conflict and tension are in the experience of language as well as in the language of experience, and contexts and texts may be distinguished from each other as objectivities in artificial ways. Style is person-made, individually, socially and/or both; and its trace emerges from somewhere betwixt and between experience, the interpretation of experience, and the restlessness of the words of the interpretation of experience. From Magee’s poem “High Flight”:

Oh I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
and danced the sky on laughter-silvered wings ... (Malan 1972:140)

to Yeats’ “An Irish airman foresees his death”:

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love ...
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds ... (Malan 1972:57-58).

an aesthetic of war may be sought in the style of the expression of the experience. The questions to be played with are: are there styles of experience? Are there styles in experience? Enkvist's already-cited idea of recognition of style as that which emerges from comparisons can be applied not only to written texts but to texts of experience. When is war war, and when is it not war? Were the poets quoted engaged in war or in something sublime? One might expect a war poem to reflect something more urgent and horrific such as Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et decorum est:

.... But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime ...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me guttering, choking, drowning (Malan 1972:76-77).

In other words, we may assume a pre-emptive style of sorts that caricatures texts of war into a genre that is more like human horror, as in "Apocalypse Now" or "Platoon". Front-line fighting and keeping the home-fires burning are both earnest of war material. Perhaps one novel writer who has spanned various experiences of war is Nevil Shute, with widely diverse experiences of war portrayed in novels such as *Landfall*, *Pied Piper*, *Pastoral*, *Requiem for a Wren* and others. Interestingly enough, his gentle treatment of the humane, and his predilection for poignancy seem to reflect an author's style that does not vary from context to context, but is prevalent in both his war novels and other novels. The point to be made in respect of the schema, however, is that the macro-contexts are generally recognised more by formal declaration than by consensual recognition of style. I think it was Kant who said that with men, the normal state is war, not peace. Perhaps this was a categorical statement and not a stylistically inclined appreciation. The essential issue is to pursue the basis for comparison whereby style can be said to be recognised. What sort of textuality does one attend to for this purpose? Written texts put to linguistic scrutiny?

Experiential texts considered hermeneutically? The schema seeks to relativise these so as to subjectify style: all points of departure impinge on style, for the sake of analysis; for recognition, however, an intuitive gestalt that merges micro and macro stylistics may well find a cohesive point in that place where social experience and style as a point of comparative departure merge into a poetics that is both social and individual.

STYLES OF TELLING WAR STORIES

“On the 12th of January 1900 we heard of a fight at Ladysmith in which the Vereeniging Commando took part. Grobler to be wounded and a day or two later Prinsloo (the husband of the lady who used to sell you butter and fowls and wanted more than anyone else) got a wound in the head at Modder River.

All round you see men returning sick or wounded and others taking their places. The heaviest of the fighting seems to be near Colenso at the Tugela. I give you here a picture of the bridge destroyed by the Boers. I wet up to Johannesburg about this time and brought back with me the picture that follows” (Tempelhoff 1998:37).

This excerpt from Leslie’s diary reflects a first-hand historical account experience of war. Compare this with a fictional account of a storm in a prisoner of war camp:

“Mere seconds pass before she feels the water strike her through the blanket, and her back becomes wet. She lies motionless on the blankets. The tent leaks. They had discovered that on the first day. Before long, she will be wet through.

The storm is here, my darling Antoine. The darkness and the water have come. And Amy lives, just as Adriaan lives. These things do not change. But tonight, tonight I love you very much. This, too has always been so.

Wet and cold, she lies and listens to the wind tug and pull the tent.

She leaps up as the tent flaps rip inwards like torn cloth.

She clings to the tent-poles.

She sees how tent-pegs are pulled form the ground, and how others are broken in the middle. She sees screaming people flee through the night from one tent to another; she sees how, in streaks of lightning, water rushes through foot-deep channels in tents” (Ferreira 1995:480-481; my translation).

Clearly, these two excerpts cannot be used in terms of a naive, blanket comparison of the texts. They represent nothing more than vague and tentative examples of two differing texts. I ask merely that they be borne in mind as more abstract comparisons are made.

(a) Authorial intent

Whereas Leslie's writing is a correspondence with his wife, Ferreira's novel is intended for publication for recreational purposes. This automatically has relevance to authorial intent, with Tempelhoff sets out as "bound to have been shaped by an interest and an awareness of diverse mental recollections" (Tempelhoff 1998:ii). Ferreira's intent is to fictionalise, perhaps for her own cathartic reasons, perhaps for financial gain. The roots of creative writing are notoriously difficult to establish. All this is obvious. What is less obvious is the connection between actuality of context and authorial intent. Ferreira is separated from the actual events of 1899-1901 by almost a century of time, Leslie's experience is more immediate. Whereas Ferreira is enabled by the activity of fictionalising to imbue and evoke vivid portrayals of human attitude and emotion, Leslie is more intent on conveying a communication than on delivering a vicarious experience. In this case, the Anglo-Boer war itself does not influence the styles of narratives thereof as much as authorial intent.

(b) Juxtapositioning, foregrounding and intra-textual/extra-textual coherence

In Leslie's work, juxtapositioning of the mundane with the focus of war events occurs to a little extent. One such example follows an account of refugee camps, when in reference to a photograph, Leslie writes "Bentinet is fond of flowers. He has forbidden any trespassing under severe penalties. I took the usual photo of April 1. That is when the chrysanthemums are in blossom" (Tempelhoff 1998:85). Compared to "Babette", where no such lost detail is allowed to stray at random meaning nothing at all, but has to refer to the monad of the narrative, whether symbolically, or of direct relevance to plot, Leslie's way of juxtapositioning leads to a consideration of textual pragmatics. What is foregrounded as the result of this juxtapositioning is a refinement of the historical consciousness referred to earlier. Leslie's mention of the flowers brings far more than the chrysanthemums to the fore: his intrinsic communication with his wife, Jane, here reflects a style of thought that reflects a reaching back into Victorian strategies of reducing tension for the sake of self and social control: a case

of holding firmly to that which is domestic and usual in the face of instability and possible chaos. Thus the text in this instance points to an historical dynamic beyond itself, enabled to do so because it operates as a dialectic with historical development, whereas “Babette” is a narratological monad, which must find a cohesion within itself, rather than a coherence with a lived context.

(c) The poetics of romanticising war

In structuring a hermeneutic of experience, the two authors under consideration are now to be scrutinised working within their respective social contexts. Leslie, maintaining a chronicle of war, communicates this so observantly and realistically to his wife, that the text has been seen as a record, not without humane content. Ferreira, writing almost a century after the events, fictionalises according to a personal aesthetic that is arguably focused on character, i.e. the protagonist Babette rather than on war. In this work the backdrop is war, the growth of the character foregrounded. In Leslie’s work the war events and the narrator enjoy a dialectic foregrounding, the content and the consciousness of the narrative impinging mutually so that the space between historical consciousness and personal consciousness is minimised. In Ferreira’s work, the space between historical and personal consciousness is writ large, allowing for a significant play of possibility. If one were to follow an argument of structured poetics, one could simply relegate the two works to issues of convention. But I wish to return to the schema set out earlier, and to avoid structure by recognising that so far as stylistics is concerned, no point of entry into the schema will be adequate if an unstructured poetics is the goal. Textually, you can do anything you want, with war. You can idealise it, disparage it, comment on it, commercialise it, exploit it, historicise it. For stylistics, though, if the intent is to discover and describe the pattern and impression that binds the experience in and of the text into an intuitive gestalt that can nevertheless be described extensively, the very word “war” is a mini-text on its own, that evokes a host of images, impulses and ideas. The poetics of war may be sought in the spaces between the macro-stylistics of differentiated contexts, the micro-stylistics of linguistic description and analysis, and social and individual agencies. In other words, what binds these together is that which links the evidence of and in text to lived contexts. To return to the point of departure, it may now be asked what in fact is being compared. The comparison of two works would seem to

be too vague, the comparison of two authors too psychological, the comparison of two lived contexts too much like applied social history. The comparison of two texts could probably not do better than each of these being taken through Van Peer's linguistic structure (Van Peer 1986:24) set out in figure 2, and then be paralleled for the purpose of an analytic rather than critical comparison. Such a comparative essay into stylistics would, to my mind, necessarily allude to the spaces created by text on textuality, that is the discontinuity between psycho-social experience and encrypted discourse. These spaces are metaphors for poetic discourse, and in the two works considered here, are filled with traces of semantic, pragmatic and cognitive meaning. Evidence of projected individual meaning is taken here to reflect romantic style: a filling of the spaces between context and text with a deliberate display of linguistic pattern and literary style. In Ferreira's work the fictionalising promotes such a display, while directly pragmatic concerns necessarily constrain, inhibit and control Leslie's work within natural influences.

(d) Poetics and style

The remaining dilemma is to position poetics with style in such a way that the relativisation of all aspects of style may be articulated in a post-structuralist way. Micro-stylistics and macro-stylistics may be approached in a structuralist way, for sure, but psycho-social agency may be approached in both structuralist and post-structuralist ways. This is the point at which stylistics is baffled by the need to articulate objectivities and subjectivities. In both of the works, subjectivities and objectivities are embedded in the text. The point to be made is that it is poetics that shifts the balance between these two elements. In other words the unarticulated spaces between context and text, between macro and micro establish the implicit and explicit structures in and of the text. The purpose of what is being put, here, is not to argue for a position between structuralism and post-structuralism, but for a position between poetics and style. Such an ambitious purpose will have to be pursued elsewhere: for the immediate purpose of commenting on the two works, what is being set out here is that the agencies presented within the schema establish the nexus of possible poetics, and are intrinsic necessities for the consideration of style. In blunt terms, the comparison is incomplete without the inclusion of these agencies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main thrust of this paper has been to consider the links between poetics and stylistics, recognising style by employing a comparative exercise. Turning experience into meaning is the business of poetics, and the manner, the pattern, the impression of that activity is the business of stylistics. Where these two meet may be a junction that is indefinitely deferred, or perhaps a number of stations to be articulated sequentially. Whatever the case, the logic of stylistics has its own style, but whether this logic is more a matter of accuracy or flair in discovering the seatedness of style is an issue also to be explored elsewhere.

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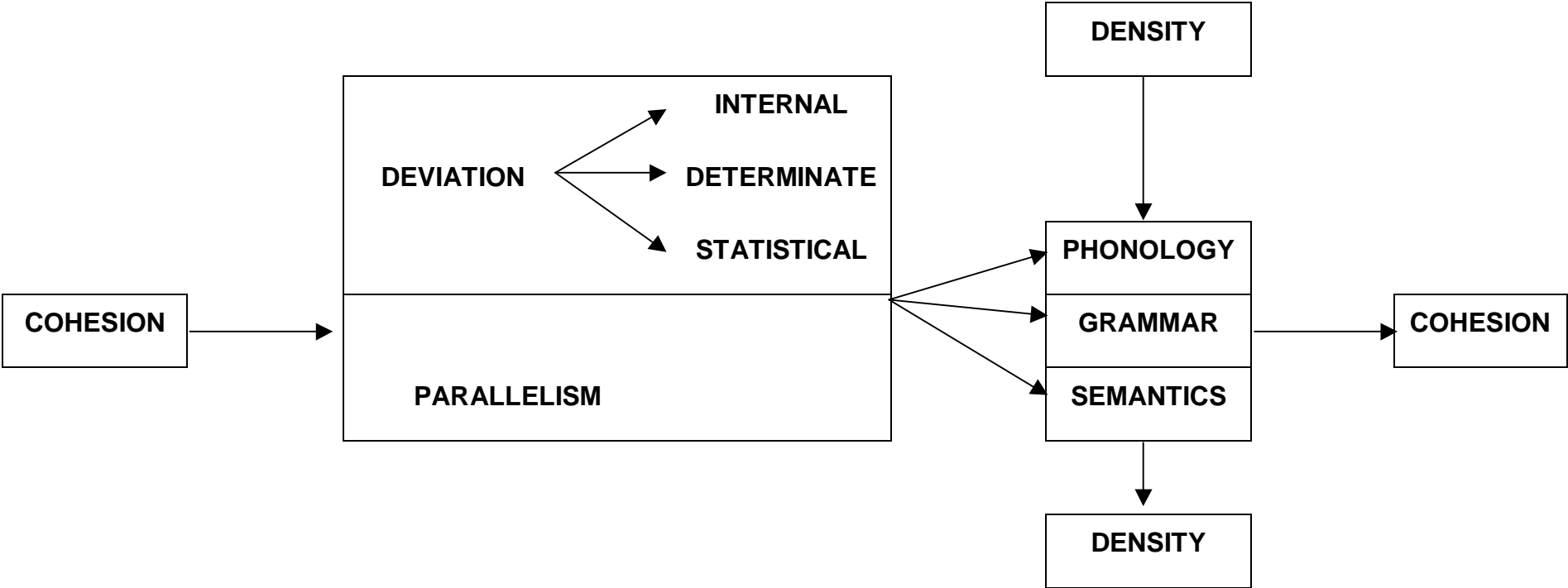
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LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE OF FOREGROUNDING



Van Peer, 1986:24 (Figure 2)

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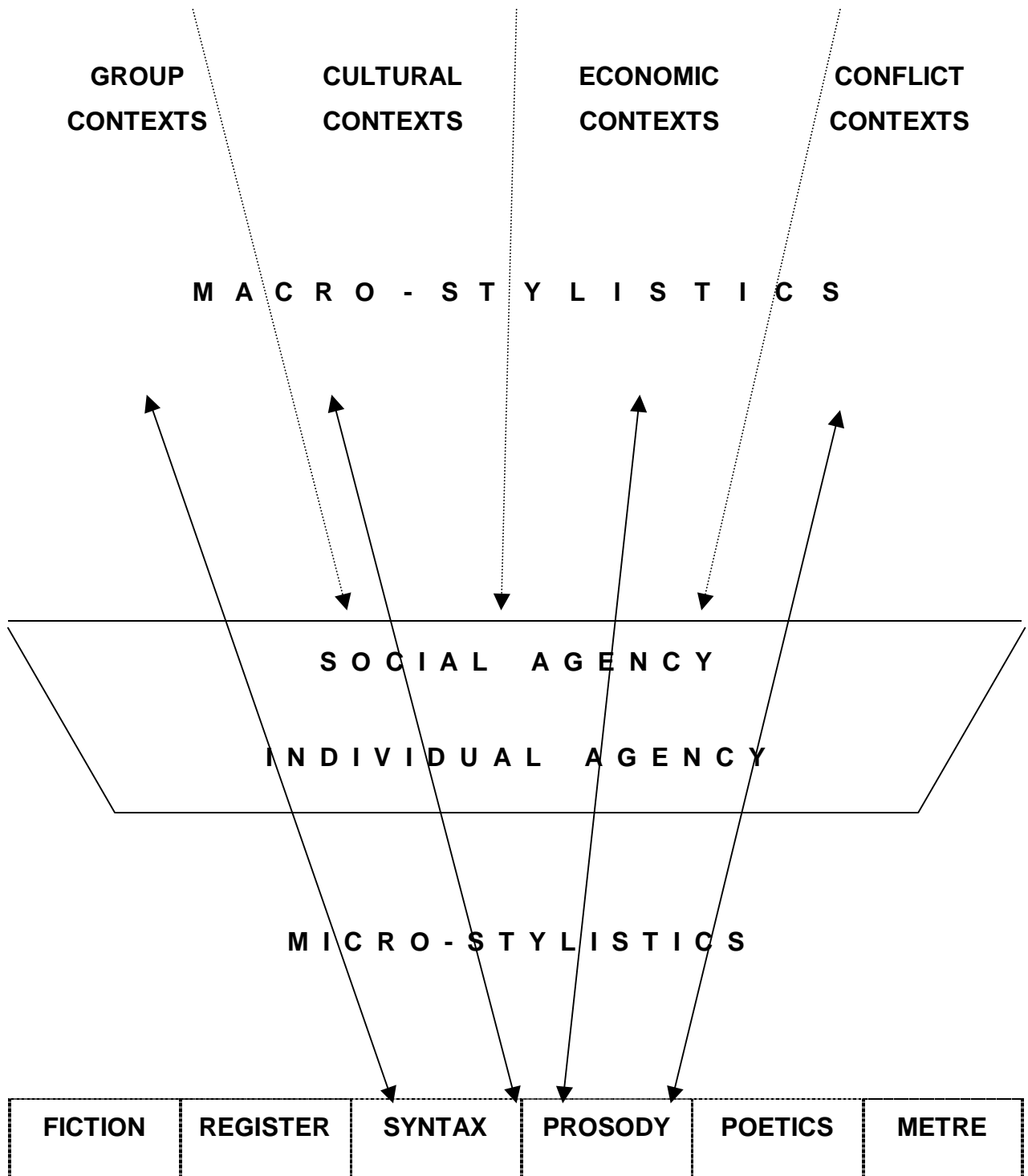


FIGURE 1