

Wilde and his experience in prison: the interrelationship between syntax and metre in The Ballad of Reading Gaol

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ABSTRACT

In the present article I carry out an analysis of the interrelationship of the syntactic and metrical structures in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. The purpose of this paper is to study how Wilde's personal experience in prison had an influence on the form of the poem, which differs from a traditional ballad in that it reflects the individual's subjective point of view. Many critics (Funke 1972; Ellmann 1987; Price 1997; Goodman 1997) have analysed how Wilde's sufferings are reflected on the content of the poem; nevertheless, none of them have focused on the formal structure of it. I propose that the study of the interrelationship of syntax and metre in Wilde's ballad is complementary to these studies. In order to find evidence to support my view I have analysed the syntactic and metrical units of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* from a linguistic perspective, following the proposals of Leech (1974) and Levin (1977) and incorporating Halliday's theories (1994) into my analysis.

Wilde's imprisonment had fatal consequences, because it brought about the fall of the man and the artist. He started to write *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* after his release in May 1897 and he finished it in October of that year. It is easily his greatest poem and it represented something altogether new in his work, because it was the first time he reached for the ballad style. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* focuses on the harshness and brutality of prisons, and in Wilde's own words, it contains "propaganda" for prison reform.

Although Wilde tried to avoid details of his own anguish in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, researchers have been very interested in tracing biographical

elements in the poem (Funke 1972; Ellmann 1987; Price 1997; Goodman 1997). Critics have traditionally analysed the content of Wilde's ballad in order to show that the poem reveals the depth of Wilde's sufferings. However, little attention has been paid to the formal structure of the poem. This study may prove fruitful, because the form of Wilde's poem differs from that of traditional ballads: ballads are impersonal and are characterised by the presence of dialogue, whereas in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* the presence of the first person singular and plural are recurrent and it is only the narrator who expresses his own attitude toward the events.

In the present paper I shall demonstrate that Wilde's personal experience is reflected in the interrelationship of syntactic and metrical structures¹ of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. In order to do so, I shall carry out a detailed analysis following the proposals of certain critics (Leech 1974; Levin 1977) who study poetry from a linguistic perspective, and I shall incorporate the theoretical constructs of Halliday's *Functional Grammar* (1994) as a methodological tool into my analysis. I shall proceed in three stages in my study of the interrelationship of the metrical units (stanza, sub-stanza, line) and the syntactic units (sentence, colon unit, comma unit) of the poem, with the aim of providing evidence that Wilde's personal experiences have a reflection on the formal structure of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol is a poem which is divided into six sections. It is composed of 109 stanzas, and there is a total of 654 lines. Each stanza is a sextet² rhymed abcbdb, in which four-stress lines (eight syllables each) and three-stress lines (six syllables each) alternate. In other words, there is regularity in the rhyme, and the stanzas are close units which are deeply interrelated with it.

According to Halliday (1994: 5ff) there are typical equivalences between what he calls the *orthographic units* (sentence, colon unit, comma unit) and the *grapho-metric units* (stanza, sub-stanza, line). He contends that a sentence corresponds to a stanza, a colon unit corresponds to a sub-stanza such as a couplet or a quatrain, and a comma unit corresponds to a line. Nonetheless, the equivalence is not always preserved, and the orthographic units may cut across the grapho-metric ones, which creates a tension between them.

In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* each sentence is equivalent to a stanza in most cases. Thus, one can claim that the correspondence between them works to a great extent. However, there are some stanzas (7, 35, 36, 59) in which there are two sentences. In all these cases, one sentence coincides with a couplet and the other with a quatrain thus:

He did not pass in purple pomp,
Nor ride a moon-white steed.
Three yards of cord and a sliding board

Are all the gallows' need:
So with rope of shame the Herald came
To do the secret deed.

(stanza 59)

As we can observe that there is a correspondence of the sentences not with the stanza but with a lower unit: the sub-stanza.

The general tendency of dependence of syntactical units on metrical ones is also dominant in the correspondence between colon units and sub-stanzas. In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* there are 65 colon units, and all of them except two (stanzas 36 and 62) coincide with a kind of sub-stanza³: 36 of them correspond to a couplet, and 27 to a quatrain.

The following stanza is one of the two in which there is an exception to the correspondence between colon unit and sub-stanza:

With slouch and swing around the ring
We trod the Fools' Parade!
We did not care: we knew we were
The Devil's Own Brigade:
And shaven head and feet of lead
Make a merry masquerade.

(stanza 36)

The abrupt pause in the third line seems to me anything but casual: it is the first time in the poem in which the first person plural becomes a syntactic subject frequently repeated in a stanza, and curiously enough it is also the first time this pronoun is used by the narrator to identify himself with the prisoners. Moreover, what comes after this colon is significant, because it introduces the prisoners' feelings in the poem. Again, we can observe the close interaction between form and content.

The following stanza is the second in which we find an exception to the equivalence of colon unit and sub-stanza:

We waited for the stroke of eight:
Each tongue was thick with thirst:
For the stroke of eight is the stroke of Fate
That makes a man accursed,
And Fate will use a running noose
For the best man and the worst.

(stanza 62)

As in the previous example, the first person plural is the syntactic subject in the exception, which takes place in the first line. Although the first colon in stanza 62 stands in a different position from that of the previous stanza, the

effect it produces is similar to the one commented on above: an unexpected strong pause is accompanied by a sudden change of rhythm, which becomes slower (this is reinforced by the second colon). As in the previous example, there is an interaction of different levels: syntactic, metrical, rhythmical and semantic (the prisoners *waited*, and the syntactic structure in the first line alters the rhythm and produces this impression).

There are 15 stanzas which contain two colon units whereas the rest only have one. In those cases the first colon unit always coincides with a couplet and the second with a quatrain⁴. Since colons slow the rhythm of the poem, making the reader pay special attention to what is being dealt with, I believe that it is particularly meaningful that in 10 of the 15 stanzas the first person plural (*we*) is the syntactic subject.

So far we have observed a high degree of correspondence between the orthographic units and the grapho-metric units. Nevertheless as the units become less general, it frequently happens that the orthographic units cut across the grapho-metric ones. In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, 225 comma units coincide with lines, but 206 do not. We find enjambements, which produce tension and forward impetus. The degree of their effects depends on their form. The form of the enjambements in Wilde's poem is not extreme: there are two instances of a form of enjambement in which the end of the line and the beginning of the next one belong to the same phrase, but the prevailing form of enjambement is the one in which the end of a line and the beginning of the next one belong to different phrases of the same clause.

Hyperbaton is present in some of the lines in which there is enjambement, and it intensifies linguistic foregrounding. In those lines in which both hyperbaton and enjambement take place, the message is thrust into the foreground of attention, and rhythm increases rapidly because syntactic expectations are kept in suspense over a long stretch. It is noteworthy that this situation is more frequent in Wilde's poem when the first person plural is the syntactic subject of the clause or sentence (stanzas 28, 36, 42, 48, 101).

Halliday (1994: ch. 7) interprets the relations between clauses in terms of the 'logical' component of the linguistic system, and establishes two dimensions in the interpretation: the tactic system, formed by *parataxis* and *hipotaxis*, which are relations between clauses usually combined in the same clause complex, and the logico-semantic system of expansion and projection, which is an inter-clausal relation, and includes *embedding*⁵.

In paratactic relations, elements of equal status are linked. Parataxis is the dominant relation in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. By means of pure parataxis the actions which appear in the clauses unfold themselves, and it seems significant that in this poem pure parataxis prevails in stanzas in which 'we' is the syntactic subject (stanzas 37, 38, 60). They are characterised by an abundance of commas and the use of asyndeton. This produces an effect of

monotony, because rhythm is slowed down. The close interaction of syntactic, metrical, and rhythmical structures in these stanzas reinforces the impression of mechanical behaviour which is given by the meaning of the words (so the semantic level is also interrelated with the others). The first lines of stanza 38 illustrate this point: “we sewed the sacks, we broke the stones, / we turned the dusty drill...”.

Paratactic extending clauses are the most frequent in the poem, and conjunctive expressions such as *and*, *or*, and *but* are constantly repeated throughout it. Paratactic enhancing clauses also appear very often, and are usually expressed by *for*, *but*, *so*, *yet*. The conjunction *and* is the most frequently used in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (125 times). There are many instances in which it appears repeated several times (*polysyndeton*), creating an almost anaphoric effect. The following stanza is an example of this:

For they starve the little frightened child
Till it weeps both night and day:
And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool,
And gibe the old and grey,
And some grow mad, and all grow bad,
And none a word may say.

(stanza 95)

The repetition of *and* in the third and fourth lines contributes to give the impression that those violent actions of the Warders are carried out all the time exactly in the same way and that they never stop. Afterwards, the constant repetition of this conjunction in the last two lines (as well as the parallel structure of the SVC clauses) intensifies the negative consequences for the prisoners. The addition indicated by *and* is reinforced by the effect that the use of the pronouns *some* and following it *all* produce, and contrasts with *none* in the sixth line.

In the third and fourth lines of stanza 95 there are instances of a special kind of co-ordination which Moreno Cabrera (1991: 637-38) calls *irreversible co-ordination*. In an irreversible co-ordination the second clause maintains a clear semantic dependence on the first one, because there is some element omitted in it which is identical to the one in the clause on which it depends semantically. In the co-ordinated clauses we are referring to the syntactic subject is “they” (the warders), and this is omitted: “and they scourge the weak, and flog the fool, and gibe the old and grey”.

In contrast to this, we have already seen that in the clauses in which “we” was the syntactic subject, this was never elliptical. The effect this change produces is meaningful: the prisoners (“we” refers to them) are constantly present to the reader, whereas the warders are treated impersonally and we pay more attention to their cruel actions than to the people who carry them out.

There is a type of parataxis in Wilde's poem which only appears twice but which is worth a comment: one clause is projected through another, which presents it as a locution. We find it at the end of stanza 4: "When a voice behind me whispered low, *'That fellow's got to swing'*" and also in the following stanza:

'Oho!' they cried, 'The world is wide
But fettered limbs go lame!
And once, or twice, to throw the dice
Is a gentlemanly game,
But he does not win who plays with Sin
In the House of Shame.'
(stanza 52)

In both cases direct speech is marked by inverted commas and written in italics. In none of them is there an identified speaker. In stanza 4 it is *a voice*, and in stanza 52 "they" refers to *evil sprites* (stanza 48). There is never conversation among the prisoners, who always have to keep silent (see stanzas 63, 73, 74), and we are only offered the narrator's hallucinations. The use of direct speech in stanza 52 reinforces this fact. A number of ways of focusing the attention on it interact at different levels: an exclamation mark is used, there are enjambements, the number of syllables in the last three lines is altered and internal rhyme is produced (*cried-wide ; twice-dice ; win-Sin*).

Another type of relationship between clauses is hypotaxis. In hypotactic relations, elements of unequal status are bound. Hypotactic enhancing clauses are the most frequent type of hypotaxis in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, particularly those of time. There are 18 time clauses in the poem, and the conjunctions used are *when, as, before, while, till*. Time plays an important role in the poem: on the one hand, time is an obsession for prisoners; on the other, the importance of this element is related to the narrator's shift of verbal tenses.

The narrator tells a story which occurred in the past, and he uses the past tense. However, there are some moments in which he interrupts the narration in order to introduce his own comment or criticism on the subject. This change in theme is accompanied by a change in verbal tense, and he uses the present tense. The first time he interrupts the narration of the event is in the second part of the first section (stanzas 7-16). First he introduces the theme he is going to narrate and afterwards he gives his opinion about it. In the second section he resumes the story. There are some couplets (stanzas 30, 66), a quatrain (stanza 34 and some stanzas (23, 24, 25, 61, 67, 72, 77, 79) throughout the poem in which he introduces certain remarks, but it is not until the end that he introduces again his comments in an extended way (this starts in stanza 89, which is the final one in section 4 and lasts till the end of the poem). If we take into account that the poem is a ballad, this amount of personal bias seems surprising. However, this is understood if we bear in mind Wilde's intentions when writing it. As regards the

last two sections Wilde himself said the following: “The propaganda which I desire to make begins there” (Cunningham 1997: 395).

Embedding is also present in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. In contrast with parataxis and hypotaxis, in which the relationship between clauses is direct, in embedding the relation between the embedded clause and the clause within which it is embedded is indirect. The most frequent case of embedding in the poem is the relative clause (32 times). We also find cases in which an embedded clause functioning as Subject appears at the end of the clause in which it is embedded. For instance (25)

It is sweet to dance to violins
 When Love and Life are fair:
 To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes
 Is delicate and rare:
 But it is not sweet with nimble feet
 To dance upon the air!

The second clause is a marked variant, because the clause Subject is at the beginning, whereas the others are unmarked. Nevertheless, the most relevant clause of the stanza with respect to content is not the second clause, but the third. In order to show that this is so, different levels interact: the number of syllables in the fifth line is altered, a conjunction is introduced at the beginning and there is hyperbaton, the enjambement is more abrupt than in the first and third lines because the clause Subject is in the following line and the rhythm becomes faster, ending with an exclamation mark.

So far critics have paid little attention to the study of the formal structure of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. In the foregoing paper I have analysed the syntactic and metrical patterns in Wilde’s poem and my aim has been to demonstrate that Wilde’s personal experience in prison had effects on the interrelationship between syntax and metre in this poem.

To sum up, the results of the analysis carried out in this article of the correspondence between syntactic and metrical units lead to the following conclusions: firstly, regularity at the metrical level coincides with regularity at the syntactic level. Secondly, the foregrounding of attention tends to be related to the presence of the first person singular and above all the first person plural, which is used by the narrator to identify with the hanged guardsman or more often to include himself among the prisoners⁶.

NOTES

¹ Even though I am going to focus my analysis on these levels, the rest of them will also be taken into account and I will refer to them whenever I find it necessary, because they all are inextricably related in a poem.

² Wilde used a sextet, although the ballad stanza is an abcb quatrain (Bold 1979; Häublein 1978). That is, Wilde kept the ballad stanza, but adds a couplet to it. He may have been influenced by Coleridge, who included a number of six-line stanzas in *The Ryme of the Ancient Mariner*. For an analysis of the influence of Coleridge's ballad on Wilde's, see Ellmann (1987: 498-502)

³ Another ortographic unit is the semi-colon, which also coincides with a sub-stanza. There are 27 semi-colons in Wilde's poem: 13 of them correspond to quatrains and 12 to couplets.

⁴ It is interesting to notice that the poem's structure is deeply rooted in the multiples of the number two: the poem is divided into *six* sections, and its stanzas are *sextets* (6 lines each). Stanzas are composed of *couplets* (2 lines each) and *quatrains* (4 lines each). Lines of 8 and 6 syllables alternate in the poem.

⁵ Parataxis and hypotaxis are general to clause, phrase, group and word, while embedding is only used with clauses and phrases (see Halliday 1994, second edition).

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