

Waymarkers to *MANAS* (2)

“NOVEL IN VERSE” - HOW VALID IS THE FORMAT?

By Chris Godwin

An English translation recently appeared of Christoph Ransmayr's 2006 “novel in verse” *Der fliegende Berg*. With the forthcoming publication of Döblin's verse-epic *Manas* in autumn 2020, a good opportunity has arisen to apply a Comparative Literature analysis to the question: what distinguishes a “novel in verse” from poetry on the one hand, and standard literary prose fiction on the other? The results, I hope, will help to provide waymarkers into Döblin's great but unknown epic.

Three texts compared

For this exercise I'm going to analyse portions of three texts, two written originally in German and now translated into English, and the third written originally in English:

Fredy Neptune (Carcanet Press 1998): a novel in verse by the Australian poet Les Murray. The text comprises some ten thousand quite long lines.

The Flying Mountain (2006; English translation Seagull Books 2018) by Austrian writer Christoph Ransmayr. Notwithstanding Ransmayr's brief prefatory disclaimer that his “ragged line” print layout does not make a “novel in verse”: (“a floating line – or better, a flying line – is free and does not belong to poets alone”), the fact of the visual appearance of the text (some ten thousand mainly short lines) – and the assumption of several reviewers that it is therefore “poetry” – justifies inclusion in this analysis;

Manas: epische Dichtung (1926; English translation Galileo Publishing, forthcoming 2020) by German writer Alfred Döblin; around 12,000 mostly quite short lines.

By a strange co-incidence, both the originally-German texts feature a lot of action in the Himalaya. There their resemblance ends.

Method

The first two hundred words or so of each text form our sample, see below. For the two originally German texts, both the German and the English versions are considered.

Although the German word for “poetry” (more broadly “serious creative writing”: *dichten/Dichtung*) is unrelated to the word for “thick, dense, condensed” (it comes from the Latin *dictare*: “dictate for someone to write down”), nevertheless the folk-etymology is well motivated, and it's not unreasonable to propose *density* as the first validity test for a novel presented in a format normally reserved for poetry:

TEST 1: What is the **information density** of a given excerpt? To what extent does the information density exceed what a standard-format literary prose paragraph might normally provide?

The second test concerns *speech/language*: not just the words lying inert on the printed page, but their speech-sounds (rhythm, alliteration, echo, euphony, even cacophony), the images they evoke, the resonances and repetitions and interweaving of meanings, in short their sensuous as well as their cognitive effects:

TEST 2: What is the density of the **sensuous language effects**, i.e. poetic rather than prosaic qualities?

The third test concerns the *implications* of the text, the extent to which the words create meanings and echoes beyond the literal surface. How far do they rise above the banal, the stale, the quotidian of so much undistinguished literary production:

TEST 3: What is the **allusive power** of the text? How far does it **create meaning** beyond the literal surface: –meanings that jolt reactions from one’s own experience?

Analysis

Test 1: information density

.1. *Fredy Neptune* begins with an Australian man of German parentage chatting to us about his life. We see old family photographs: parents, dead brother, his youthful self on a farm. He mentions his motives for going to sea, the pros and cons of steam over sail, the prestige of having visited exotic places. Then the First World War enters, bringing confused loyalties, the need for survival strategies, and vivid action scenes.

COMMENTARY: These 231 words already tell quite a lot about the narrator’s background and character, and depict a major world event through his eyes.

.2. *The Flying Mountain* begins with the narrator describing his death high on a mountain. He gives factual details of location, height, temperature, his injured hand, and tells us what his consciousness notices: his icy breath, clouds, sky, stars by day.

COMMENTARY: In 167 words (German)/195 words (English) we gain a vivid sense of the narrator’s dire situation. The scene is both factually set, and presented through his subjective consciousness.

.3. *Manas* begins with a kind of prelude of 30 lines. (This stands apart from the immediately following text but, as we read on, turns out to be a quasi- summary of the entire novel’s action). We first follow a vivid depiction of a high-mountain storm: a bird’s eye view of a natural event that encompasses icy mountains, deep valleys, waterfalls, forested slopes, and the plains of India. But then the scene becomes no longer natural, for dead souls drift and capsize helplessly in the storm, which now we learn is the breath of the god Shiva.

COMMENTARY: In 175 words (German)/186 words (English) we are presented with a scene that resists interpretation at first reading. A natural event turns out to be supernatural, a natural landscape turns out to be mythical, Shiva’s realm of the dead. We must read the lines again to re-interpret our initial understanding, and refer back to them as the plot progresses.

Test 2: Sensuous language-effects

- .1. *Fredy Neptune* : The text conveys a vigorous vernacular with many striking phrases: *sausage day, brain-burn, old top ropes, great bushfire of work*. The line breaks strongly support the breath-units and rhythms of conversational speech. For all its vigour the language avoids consciously “pretty” phrases - *plummy undertakers’ city* maybe the only exception, but it can also be the pithy observation of a no-bullshit working man. The narrative has a strong forward motion.
- .2. *The Flying Mountain* : Line breaks don’t always match natural breath-units. Little seems lost in formatting the text as standard prose (hence little gained by formatting in “ragged lines”?). Descriptions are clear and vivid, but apart from the first surprising line there are no striking turns of phrase that bring the reader to pause and reflect.
- .3. *Manas* : Of the three passages this is by far the most “dense” in sensuous language: much alliteration (*bliesen Berge Blumen, warfen Wasserschwall, wirrenden wurrenden, blew bloom, tossed torrents, walls awoke, turbulent tumultuous...*), assonance (*senkrechten Felswände, beasts trees, radiant plains, gliding by, stretched themselves...*), incantation (*Euphorbia...*), onomatopoeia (*Wassergeprassel, pattering waters*), rhythmic variety (the pounding drum of the line with “drumming”, followed by hesitancy in identifying the strange objects). The rhythms are so well aligned to breath-units that they remain powerfully present even when converted to standard prose format, hence force a “poetic” reading.

Test 3: Allusive power

- .1. *Fredy Neptune* : The first lines already hint at a history (German immigrant pioneers to Australia) and refer explicitly to the wider world and the first major disaster of the 20th century. While the initially puzzling “sausage day” is clarified eight lines later by “weisswurst”, the going-to-sea whets our curiosity for the narrator’s yarns about his life. Reading on, we follow the picaresque narrator on a succession of wild rides through the rest of the century. His first-person experiences (including, crucially, the loss of all bodily feeling/sense of pain in shock at having witnessed the burning of Armenian nuns by a Turkish mob) will be a window both to world-shaping events and the meaning of his own life.
- .2. *The Flying Mountain* : All we know from the opening lines is that the first-person narrator is in trouble high on a mountain in a region influenced by Chinese culture (Year of the Horse). Our curiosity is whetted by the first line “I died”, but so far we have no idea what led to the situation or who else might be involved. Reading on, we have a back-story of two brothers growing up in rural Ireland, who set off to locate a Tibetan mountain allegedly the last blank spot on the world’s maps.
- .3. *Manas* : The whole opening section is deeply enigmatic. What is the relevance of the geographic information to the rest of the novel? Souls? Shiva? “Mist onto water”? The surface words clearly hint at deeper meanings.

Conclusion

	Test 1 Information	Test 2 Language	Test 3 Allusiveness
<i>Fredy Neptune</i>	High	High	Medium
<i>Flying Mountain</i>	Low	Low	Medium
<i>Manas</i>	High	Very high	High

The analysis indicates that *Manas* is truly a **verse epic**: it has a “thick” information content, a very high usage of poetic-language effects, and a high degree of allusive, non-literal meanings.

Fredy Neptune, in its quite different style, is also a creditable **novel in verse**. The verse format enables a “thickening” of information; the narrator’s vigorous (and very “oral”) vernacular cleanses the language of literary pretentiousness, and gives an underdog perspective on happenings on the global stage.

Ransmayr was right to **disclaim** *The Flying Mountain* as a novel in verse, despite the typographic setting. It’s a standard literary novel with some interesting scene settings; but the attempt at a Cain/Abel back story is unconvincing. While the “ragged line” format puts some readers off, mountaineers seem to like the novel.

THE SAMPLE TEXTS

.1a. *Fredy Neptune* (original format)

That was sausage day
on our farm outside Dungog.
There's my father Reinhard Boettcher,
my mother Agnes. There is brother Frank
who died of the brain-burn, meningitis.
There I am having my turn
at the mincer. Cooked meat with parsley and salt
winding out, smooth as gruel, for the weisswurst.

Here's me riding bareback in the sweater
I wore to sea first.
I never learned the old top ropes,
I was always in steam. Less capstan, less climbing,
more re-stowing cargo. Which could be hard and slow
as farming – but to say Why this is Valparaiso!
Or: I'm in Singapore, and know my way about
takes a long time to get stale.

My German had got me a job
out of New York on a Hansa freighter, the Opitz.
That's how we came to be cooking alive that August,
in Messina, plummy undertakers' city.
The first I heard that the War had really come
was a black-faced officer with a target and a church
on his cap, directing sailors to rip
our decks up, for the coal below.

I turned out of my hammock
to fight them – and our bos'un chucked me a shovel:
We're coaling that battlecruiser.
There! The English are after her!
It was like one great bushfire of work,
the whole harbour, under smoke and brown dust,
slings, lighters, big crane-buckets slopping
man-killing rocky lumps, before they poured.

.1b. *Fredy Neptune* (standard prose format)

That was sausage day on our farm outside Dungog. There's my father Reinhard Boettcher, my mother Agnes. There is brother Frank who died of the brain-burn, meningitis. There I am having my turn at the mincer. Cooked meat with parsley and salt winding out, smooth as gruel, for the weisswurst.

Here's me riding bareback in the sweater I wore to sea first. I never learned the old top ropes, I was always in steam. Less capstan, less climbing, more re-stowing cargo. Which could be hard and slow as farming – but to say Why this is Valparaiso! Or: I'm in Singapore, and know my way about takes a long time to get stale.

My German had got me a job out of New York on a Hansa freighter, the Opitz. That's how we came to be cooking alive that August, in Messina, plummy undertakers' city. The first I heard that the War had really come was a black-faced officer with a target and a church on his cap, directing sailors to rip our decks up, for the coal below.

I turned out of my hammock to fight them – and our bos'un chucked me a shovel: *We're coaling that battlecruiser. There! The English are after her!* It was like one great bushfire of work, the whole harbour, under smoke and brown dust, slings, lighters, big crane-buckets slopping man-killing rocky lumps, before they poured.

.2a. *Flying Mountain* (English – original format. Translated by Simon Pare)

I died
six thousand eight hundred and forty meters above sea level
on the fourth of May in the year of the horse.

My deathplace
lay at the foot of an ice-armoured needle of rock
in whose lee I had survived the night.

The air temperature at the time of my death
was minus 30 degrees Celsius
and I saw the moisture
of my final breath crystallise
and disperse like smoke into the light of dawn.
I felt no cold. I was in no pain.

The pulsing of the wound in my left hand
was strangely dulled.
Through the bottomless chasms at my feet
fists of cloud came drifting from the southeast.

The ridge leading from my shelter
up and up
to the pyramidal peak
was lost in driving banners of ice,
but the sky above the highest heights
remained so deep a blue
that in it I thought I could make out the constellations
of Boötes, Serpens and Scorpio.

Neither did the stars vanish
when the sun rose over the plumes of ice
and sealed my eyes,
but appeared in my blindness
even against the red of my closed lids
as white pulsating sparks.

.2b. *Flying Mountain* (English – standard prose format)

I died six thousand eight hundred and forty meters above sea level on the fourth of May in the Year of the Horse. My deathplace lay at the foot of an ice-armoured needle of rock in whose lee I had survived the night.

The air temperature at the time of my death was minus 30 degrees Celsius, and I saw the moisture of my final breath crystallise and disperse like smoke into the light of dawn. I felt no cold. I was in no pain. The pulsing of the wound in my left hand was strangely dulled. Through the bottomless chasms at my feet fists of cloud came drifting from the southeast.

The ridge leading from my shelter up and up to the pyramidal peak was lost in driving banners of ice, but the sky above the highest heights remained so deep a blue that in it I thought I could make out the constellations of Boötes, Serpens and Scorpio. Neither did the stars vanish when the sun rose over the plumes of ice and sealed my eyes, but appeared in my blindness even against the red of my closed lids as white pulsating sparks.

.3a. *Manas* (English – original format. Translated by C D Godwin))

THERE was no more rain.
Storms shredded the black clouds hither and down
From the eastern iceheads of Himalaya,
Blew them onto mountains and cedar forests,
Onto blooming meadows, southerly slopes,
This bedlam of beasts and trees –
Euphorbia acacia stands of bamboo; –
Tossed them, torrents and ice-needles,
Over sheer rockwalls,
Seething hills and spates,
Over rivers, --
They raced thundering down deep valleys,
Kosi, Alaknanda, Yamuna,
Surged onto the radiant plains of India, --
Storms shredded the black clouds away,
Howled.

And ravines meadows rockwalls awoke to the drumming of waters,
Began howling like seas.
And ships rode on the seas.
What sort of ships were they that rode the sea,
Boats bobbing, darting under sail, capsizing, coming aright?
In the pattering of the waters
Souls, pale misty souls,
Came gliding by nooses of vine, stretched themselves past grasping thorns,
Shimmers of silence in the turbulent tumultuous hubbub.
They clumped in white masses, waited motionless under the downpour,
Wind whirled them high, breath from the mouth of Shiva,
Three-eyed God on crystal Kailash,

Whirled them high, spun them like a wheel,
Spilled them, mist onto water.

.3b. Manas (English – standard prose format)

There was no more rain. Storms shredded the black clouds hither and down from the eastern iceheads of Himalaya, blew them onto mountains and cedar forests, onto blooming meadows, southerly slopes, this bedlam of beasts and trees – euphorbia acacia stands of bamboo; – tossed them, torrents and ice-needles, over sheer rockwalls, seething hills and spates, over rivers, -- they raced thundering down deep valleys, Kosi, Alaknanda, Yamuna, surged onto the radiant plains of India! -- storms shredded the black clouds away, howled.

And ravines meadows rockwalls awoke to the drumming of waters, began howling like seas. And ships rode on the seas. What sort of ships were they that rode the sea, boats bobbing, darting under sail, capsizing, coming aright? In the pattering of the waters souls, pale misty souls, came gliding by nooses of vine, stretched themselves past grasping thorns, shimmers of silence in the turbulent tumultuous hubbub.

They clumped in white masses, waited motionless under the downpour, wind whirled them high, breath from the mouth of Shiva, three-eyed God on crystal Kailash, whirled them high, spun them like a wheel, spilled them, mist onto water.

.2c. Flying Mountain (German – original format)

Ich starb
6840 Meter über dem Meeresspiegel
am vierten Mai im Jahr des Pferdes.

Der Ort meines Todes
lag am Fuß einer eisgepanzerten Felsnadel,
in deren Windschatten ich die Nacht überlebt hatte.

Die Lufttemperatur meiner Todesstunde
betrug minus 30 Grad Celsius,
und ich sah, wie die Feuchtigkeit
meiner letzten Atemzüge kristallisierte
und als Rauch in der Morgendämmerung zerstob.

Ich fror nicht. Ich hatte keine Schmerzen.
Das Pochen der Wunde an meiner linken Hand
war seltsam taub.
Durch die bodenlosen Abgründe zu meinen Füßen
trieben Wolkenfäuste aus Südost.

Der Grat, der von meiner Zuflucht
weiter und weiter
bis zur Pyramide des Gipfels emporführte,
verlor sich in jagenden Eisfahnen,
aber der Himmel über den höchsten Höhen
blieb von einem so dunklen Blau,
daß ich darin Sternbilder zu erkennen glaubte:
den Bärenhüter, die Schlange, den Skorpion.

Und die Sterne erloschen auch nicht,
als über den Eisfahnen die Sonne aufging
und mir die Augen schloß,
sondern erschienen in meiner Blendung
und noch im Rot meiner geschlossenen Lider
als weiß pulsierende Funken.

.2d. Flying Mountain (German – standard prose format)

Ich starb 6840 Meter über dem Meeresspiegel am vierten Mai im Jahr des Pferdes. Der Ort meines Todes lag am Fuß einer eisgepanzten Felsnadel, in deren Windschatten ich die Nacht überlebt hatte. Die Lufttemperatur meiner Todesstunde betrug minus 30 Grad Celsius, und ich sah, wie die Feuchtigkeit meiner letzten Atemzüge kristallisierte und als Rauch in der Morgendämmerung zerstob.

Ich fror nicht. Ich hatte keine Schmerzen. Das Pochen der Wunde an meiner linken Hand war seltsam taub. Durch die bodenlosen Abgründe zu meinen Füßen trieben Wolkenfäuste aus Südost.

Der Grat, der von meiner Zuflucht weiter und weiter bis zur Pyramide des Gipfels emporführte, verlor sich in jagenden Eisfahnen, aber der Himmel über den höchsten Höhen blieb von einem so dunklen Blau, daß ich darin Sternbilder zu erkennen glaubte: den Bärenhüter, die Schlange, den Skorpion. Und die Sterne erloschen auch nicht, als über den Eisfahnen die Sonne aufging und mir die Augen schloß, sondern erschienen in meiner Blendung und noch im Rot meiner geschlossenen Lider als weiß pulsierende Funken.

.3c. Manas (German – original format)

ES war kein Regen mehr.
Stürme rissen die schwarzen Wolken hin und hinunter,
Von den östlichen Eishäupten des Himalaja,
Bliesen sie auf die Berge und Cedernwaldungen,
Auf die Blumenwiesen, südlichen Abhänge,
Das Gewühl der Bäume und Tiere,
Euphorbien Akazien Bambusgebüsch,
Warfen sie, Wasserschwall und Eisnadeln,
Über die senkrechten Felswände,
Die wallenden Hügel und Sturzbäche,
Über die Flüsse, -
Donnernd rannten sie in den tiefen Tälern,
Kosi, Alaknanda, Jumna,
Rollten in die glühende indische Ebene –
Stürme rissen die schwarzen Wolken hin,
Heulten.
Und die Schluchten Wiesen Felswände erwachten im Trommeln des Wassers,
Heulten wie Meere auf.
Und auf die Meere fuhren Schiffe.

Was fuhren für Schiffe auf dem Meer,
Schaukelten Boote, huschten mit Segeln, kenterten, standen auf?
Im Wassergeprassel
Seelen, dunstweiße Seelen,
Glitten um Lianengeschling, zogen sich lang um greifendes Gestrüpp,
Im wirrenden wurrenden Lärm lautlos wie Lichtschein.
Rotteten sich zu weißen Massen, standen in Gießen still,
Wind schwang sie hoch, Hauch aus dem Munde Schiwas,
Des dreiäugigen Gottes auf dem kristallinen Kailash,
Schwang sie hoch, drehte sie im Rad,
Verschüttete sie, Dampf mit dem Wasser.

.3d. Manas (German - standard prose format)

Es war kein Regen mehr. Stürme rissen die schwarzen Wolken hin und hinunter, von den östlichen Eishäupten des Himalaja, bliesen sie auf die Berge und Cedernwaldungen, auf die Blumenwiesen, südlichen Abhänge, das Gewühl der Bäume und Tiere, Euphorbien Akazien Bambusgebüsch, warfen sie, wasserschwall und Eisnadeln, über die senkrechten Felswände, die wallenden Hügel und Sturzbäche, über die Flüsse, - donnernd rannten sie in den tiefen Tälern, Kosi, Alaknanda, Jumna, rollten in die glühende indische Ebene – Stürme rissen die schwarzen Wolken hin, heulten.

Und die Schluchten Wiesen Felswände erwachten im Trommeln des Wassers, heulten wie Meere auf. Und auf die Meere fuhren Schiffe. Was fuhren für Schiffe auf dem Meer, schaukelten Boote, huschten mit Segeln, kenterten, standen auf? Im Wassergeprassel Seelen, dunstweiße Seelen, glitten um Lianengeschling, zogen sich lang um greifendes Gestrüpp, im wirrenden wurrenden Lärm lautlos wie Lichtschein. Rotteten sich zu weißen Massen, standen in Gießen still, Wind schwang sie hoch, Hauch aus dem Munde Schiwas, des dreiäugigen Gottes auf dem kristallinen Kailas, schwang sie hoch, drehte sie im Rad, verschüttete sie, Dampf mit dem Wasser.

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