Something Old, Something New: Recent Poetry's Use of Narrative in Wedding References

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Abstract

Wedding stories are central to much fictional narrative, on the screen and on the page. They are frequently used as key plot devices for escalating dramatic tension, for instance, and at other times play more subtle roles. If they are so common, how can they remain fresh and attractive to a reader? Writing poetry that leans on such a traditional social practice involves a necessary tension between its liberating and limiting aspects. It’s all to do with familiarity and strangeness, the revealed and the hidden, something old and something new.

Introduction

One of Paul Durcan’s poetry collections is prefaced with a quote from the Talmud: ‘The world is a wedding’. This takes to its limit the metaphorical value of the wedding in global culture, and how we might see it (especially when we wear our storyteller hats) as a vehicle for bringing together all kinds of disparate elements. The wedding is an act of unification and reconciliation, a sign of hope.

What I want to do here is to ponder aloud about references that have been made to weddings in recent poetry. I will consider what they say about the existence of a sort of collective wedding-narrative, and what the relationship is between the two.

By narrative, I mean a story that comprises a series of events and is typically, though not necessarily, told by a narrator. It is a statement of account and, in this case, a story that deals specifically with weddings. I have chosen weddings essentially because they occupy a significant cultural and personal meaning for many people. They sit squarely between two other signal preoccupations of life and art - birth and death. Not for nothing do we have a government body in South Australia colloquially known as ‘births, deaths and marriages’.

Weddings are common incidents in film and prose, exploited for their resonance in our own lives and for their associated dramatic potential. The use of such references in poetry can pose problems, however, due to the usually restricted length of works in the genre. Wedding related issues and plot elements often cannot be elaborated and developed in the same way in poetry as in prose. We might then expect poetry, a typically more condensed form of writing, to be particularly economical in its wedding references. It should be able to rely effectively on a popular understanding of social ritual and meaning connected with weddings when it needs to make brief reference to a key moment in human stories.

The Map of the Wedding

The novelist, semiotician and philosopher, Umberto Eco, in his essay, ‘On the Impossibility of Drawing a Map of the Empire on a Scale of 1 to 1’, comments on an imagined book that deals with maps made on an immense scale. The maps culminate in one that is on the same scale as the very empire it represents. Eco meditates on the challenges of such extraordinary mapping. One of his postulates for the requirements of such a map includes: ‘That the map be faithful, depicting not only the natural reliefs of the empire but also its artifacts, as well as the totality of the empire’s subjects…’.
In other words, it should omit nothing, being true to the original in every detail.

I am reminded, by the way, of a fractal theory puzzle. How long is the coastline of Australia? Measuring it with a metre rule would produce a greater figure than would use of, say, a 100 metre rule because the former could follow smaller variations more closely. The result always depends, therefore, on the unit of measurement and the degree of approximation inherent in its use. Which produces the ‘better’ outcome? What level of approximation is good enough?

Back to the map. Eco next considers the difficulty of various methods of production for such a map, and the issue of how it might be folded and unfolded. He concludes with the critical issue, what he calls The Paradox of the Normal Map.

When the map is installed over all of the territory (whether suspended or not), the territory of the empire has the characteristic of being a territory entirely covered by a map. The map does not take account of this characteristic, which would have to be presented on another map that depicted the territory plus the lower map. But such a process would be infinite... (Umberto Eco 1998, p. 93)

He concludes that: ‘Every 1:1 map always reproduces the territory unfaithfully.’ In other words, the exercise sounds about as futile as writing a true history of anything.

The question of fiction in maps is an interesting one. In an interview on Radio 5AN, Adelaide, last Tuesday (23 July 2002), a spokesperson for UBD publishers said that they deliberately include an error in every map in their directories. It could be a dead-end lane that doesn’t actually exist, for instance, and it is put there so that any unlawful copying could be readily detected. A tall tale?

And are we a long way from weddings here? I think not. Eco’s fanciful puzzle is based on the premise of total and accurate representation of the original. It deals with how one might construct a complete account of reality, even supposing that there were only a single version possible. How could a poem make an acceptable reference to the larger map of the recognisable wedding story? And is the degree of faithfulness an issue?

The Hidden Narrative

I am not claiming that poems about weddings could ever represent the whole body of wedding narratives. The notion of mapping, however, allows me to introduce the idea of representation. If no one could actually live beneath a perfect, physical 1:1 map of their own existence, perhaps they could and already do live within an allusive and imperfect one; a changing map that is constructed from fragments of image and word. In the same way, wedding narratives exist as a bundle of anecdotes, poems, songs, memories, souvenirs, photographs, stories and movies. They comprise a collective story to which millions of people contribute.

It is as if we have created the great, suspended map of ‘the wedding story’ by synthesising various references to it from a multiplicity of lesser stories. A grand wedding-narrative stands as the template to which each minor story refers, however obliquely or reluctantly. Every wedding story lives inside that greater story. Each is a minor narrative that depends on the listener or reader understanding something of the surnarrative. A new story about weddings becomes part of the whole body of wedding material itself; reflecting and imbedding in and enlarging the greater narrative.

What is this surnarrative? The hidden or tacit surnarrative is the traditional story of a wedding. Its basic elements are constituted from cultural practice of courtship, wedding ceremony, and honeymoon. It employs the traditional story’s exposition, escalation of tension, climax, and aftermath. Even in the fuller versions that a long work of prose may relate, much of the story may be simply
implied. For instance, the courtship may remain untold if the important focus is on the tribulations and pleasures of the wedding ceremony itself. And if the immediate outcome of the wedding ceremony is the critical issue, details of the honeymoon stage may also be irrelevant. All of this is normal editing practice for a particular story, but the surnarrative embraces the full sweep of events.

A poem is unlikely to directly represent it in a straightforward manner because maintaining a reader’s interest requires something fresher, something more novel. Possible variations include humorous or satirical treatment, a focus on characters, or a twist on the plot. Prose will use these too, but poetry needs to be more economical about it. It will employ more cryptic and more metaphoric references.

I am not supposing that a wedding story means the same thing to all people, of course. The degree of reader recognition and identification will vary with the telling and with the reader. Feminist theory, for instance, would have much to say on that score. But within the bounds of any theoretical approach, the wedding content referred to in a poem will tend to be briefer - and sharper and richer.

The Wedding Album

Variations to the standard wedding story are not the unique province of literature. This licence to vary the standard plot is echoed in real life. How plastic, for example, is the notion of truth in every day accounts of weddings?

When he reviewed an exhibition, ‘(The World May Be) Fantastic’, at the 2002 Biennale of Sydney, John Neylon commented on the Artistic Director’s:  

…the determination to present acts which offer or pose an escape from reality…He lists the shift in senses of reality being reshaped by new technologies and geopolitics as being the primary forces, which challenge individual consciousness, particularly the capacity of digital technologies and the net to create super fictions from which there appears to be no avenue of escape. (John Neylon 2002, p. 16)

If the wedding is a narrative, it is recorded these days in the wedding album or video or DVD, or all three. Don’t like the version you just lived? You can create another one. Biographies are as notoriously biased as history and its maps. If you can’t edit your life, at least you can edit an account of it.

John Lennon and Yoko Ono appeared to be seeking up the sacred and stereotypical nature of the wedding album when they released their LP recording titled Wedding Album in 1969. The sense remained, however, that they were not so much rejecting the notion of the traditional wedding album as trying to make something fresh of it – in other words, to enliven and individualise the concept. Their sentiment was not original. People have found all sorts of ways to make their weddings memorable. In this way, personal variations on the template of the wedding surnarrative are constantly being pursued.

Weddings seem as variable as human identity. In 1993, artist, Alix Lambert, undertook her ‘Wedding Project’, marrying and then divorcing three men and a woman within six months. She displayed her wedding certificates, divorce papers, wedding pictures and wedding presents in her gallery showing. This really seemed like the fast food approach to getting hitched (Greene 1998, Online).

All of us would have read of various individuals’ attempts to make their weddings unique – special vehicle, special location, special dress. But even when there is no outward showing of extreme behaviour – a hot air balloon landing on the beach at Acapulco with a bride wearing a dress of condor feathers - there is the investment in a happy outcome that makes the wedding such a tempting story.
The Narrative Approach

William Labov, in his article, ‘Some Further Steps in Narrative Analysis’, notes that:

…narratives are privileged forms of discourse which play a central role in almost every conversation. Our efforts to define other speech events with comparable precision have shown us that narrative is the prototype, perhaps the only example of a well formed speech event with a beginning, a middle, and an end. (William Labov 1997, Online)

The focus of Labov’s study was on oral monologue but he points out that the expectation of a clear structure is also evident in wedding stories, whether oral or written. Many of the poems I have been looking at employ only glancing references to weddings. They may use shorthand references to clothing, for example, or the state of being a bride or groom, or artifacts of the wedding ceremony, such as the wedding rings. Different aspects are often mentioned in metaphor.

Other poems centre on one part of the wedding process for a focussed narrative, for example, the proposal or the dressmaking. There are many such poems from which to choose. One example is my own poem, ‘Wedding Present’, a yarn meant to evoke a mythic quality in the unnamed narrator’s own history.

Wedding Present

it lies at the back of a drawer
the third drawer of the chest
of drawers in the corner of the room
that catches the late afternoon light
a soft diagonal of ivory
spread daily like a wedding veil
from the high window

in there
in the third drawer
behind the silk camisole
and the lace edge of some underwear
she’s worn just twice
it lies cool and matter of fact

when her Uncle Guy was seventeen
he bought it from a pawnbroker
nudged the shop door and its small bell aside
to claim the shining form
that had winked at him from the window
that had called him from across the street
to pull every coin and note he had
from his pockets

perhaps he fancied himself
a river-boat gambler
holding it snug in his palm
the small but powerful part
of an equation he waited to see
spelt out before him
somewhere in the future
real or imagined
either way possible

her father hated it
said that it went to his head
Uncle Guy’s head
though his main complaint was
that it went to his head
her father’s
because of Uncle Guy’s habit when drunk of
waking her father while holding the gun
to the curve of bone behind his ear
and talking about death
for an hour or three
about its pleasure and its inevitability
her father knew the circle of its barrel
firmly
intimately
against his skin
and the drunken whirl of logic that kept it there

now in the back of the drawer
a small nickel plated revolver
nestles against her underwear
a gun neat as a baby’s hand
shiny as a champagne flute
its handle intricately carved from
mother of pearl
shows Lazarus rising

her father stole it from her uncle
when he was out drinking
and kept it in a sack in the garden shed
wrapped in hessian and laid next
to the new season’s iris bulbs
until Uncle Guy began to forget
and her father began to grow as strange
as Uncle Guy had ever been
and one day
her wedding day
presented it to her
fresh as a bunch of flowers
smiling

on its handle the figure is still looming
in subtle rainbow tints from its grave
the gun is waiting
cold and metallic
and its purpose
instilled in those long nights
at her father’s ear
is not forgotten

in three weeks
she will pull out the drawer and
reach in there blind
her hand swimming around for a bra
will connect for long enough
and the gun will finally fire
through the left cup of the bra
through the back of the chest of drawers
through the wall of the bedroom
and through the picture of her late father
and her late uncle
hanging in the next room

one of them will suffer a flesh wound
at last

Steve Evans 1997, pp. 80-82.

Another approach, at the extreme end of the scale for brevity, is Steve Kelen’s succinct version of the wedding as yarn, ‘The Wedding’:

**The Wedding**

Punch-up in car park
Groom spits teeth, classic wedding
Never forgotten

S. K. Kelen 2000, p. 22.

Both poems rely on reader knowledge of wedding practices, including the things that can go wrong. They are framed within an unstated context, just as Andy Kissane’s representation of a wedding in his modern adaptation of an old story, Tristan and Isolde.

**Tristan and Isolde**

It was like any other wedding
The bridesmaids’ dresses
The speeches
The awful music
The telegram from the football team
And Uncle Morgan’s joke
That my hem needed taking up
A darker perspective emerges in a poem like Jude Aquilina’s ‘Con Nubial’, which recasts wedding vows with a bleak look into the future.

**Con Nubial**

What is it, that calls them like lemmings

to churches and gardens, precipice in waiting?

Is it the frothy sea of chiffon and tulle;
the waving crowd, smiling with hope and pity?

Stubborn and blinkered they pull their hopes
through sunshine and mud to the big day.

Will you take this seething rod of jealousy

to be staff to your open wounds?

Will you promise to fed it, clothe it

and lick the salt from between its toes?

Will you take this bombshell of gristle and

hair, set to explode your solitude?

Will you promise to light marital pyres

with your burning sulking silence?

And, will you both vow not to bolt or bite

while you are whipped and tamed

and made to perform daily,

in the matrimonial circus?

Jude Aquilina 2000, p. 54.

If I look over the latest batch of (sixty-six) poems with wedding references that I have been researching, some use very straightforward parts of the conventional wedding story but in fragments only. They are wistful and philosophical, musing on the dangers and joys of commitment. The other parts would make a composite wedding story containing some other variations on the surnarrative. Its main elements are:

- A grandparent puts out her best linen saved for weddings and funerals, at the same time as a dressmaker fits a gown so as to hide evidence of the bride’s pregnancy.

- The nervously smoking groom twists the ring on his finger in a fretful moment and loses it briefly, then fears the portent.

- At the reception, the bride loses a button just as a gloomy aunt, who prefers wakes to weddings, bails her up to criticise the catering.
• A fight breaks out in the car park.

• The honeymoon is a disaster of missed flights and quarrels.

• When they die in their old age, the couple's wedding portrait is placed on their gravestone.

Come to think of it, most of this is very conceivable. We are missing the bit about the best man having it off with someone in the garden, and a few other points that were probably in the other hundred or so ‘wedding’ poems I’ve found but have not consulted for this particular paper.

Death is never very far away either, as a number of poems attest. After birth itself, the event that most characterises hope and a sense of the future needs that shadow.

These variations are essential to maintain reader interest. The surnarrative is the clay from which to mould a new story, albeit sometimes with only a small but important tweak.

**Something Old, Something New?**

Eco, in his playful investigation, concludes that no tangible map could represent the whole physical truth of a place. By contrast, and in their converse relationship, individual wedding-stories may be compared with a surnarrative but are allowed to diverge from it. In fact, for the sake of novelty, they are encouraged to do so. Faithfulness is not a virtue because, unlike maps, predictability in stories is a sin. The surnarrative persists nonetheless because it is useful to be evoked as a framework against which the individual story can work.

Possible variations on the wedding surnarrative are endless. They can be substantially true to it except for additional material, or they can radically alter it. And because of our common understanding of the main features of the greater narrative, a sub-story can effectively rely on shorthand references to the larger version. This makes poetry’s use of wedding references potentially powerful since so little need be directly said, yet so much can be implied. And saying a lot with a little is what poetry does best. There is a hidden but familiar narrative that the smaller work only has to suggest.

I will be augmenting my exploration of the wedding-story in poetry with some interviews of poets, people who work in the wedding industry, and sociologists – and I’ll be completing a collection of my own poetry to accompany the thesis. At the moment, though, I stand at the very outskirts of a complex and busy city called Literary Theory. It exists as a service industry that mostly manufactures ideas about itself (and, occasionally, another city called Literature) plus some rules for thinking about thinking. It is concerned with its perceptions, and perceptions of perceptions, and it feeds on its own recycled waste. I am at the point where the path before me descends into its seductively bright lights and bustle, its clamour of languages and its promise of belonging. It says that I may never need to leave. I’ll leave a trail of crumbs, just in case. Or should that be rice?

**References**


