



Merging Language with Content: Exploring Thematic Severity through the Lens of Stylistics in Ocean Vuong's Poetry

Aoitishjya Tridip Neelam
Tezpur University, India

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how Ocean Vuong uses language in his poetry to bring together queerness, grief, and trauma. Instead of seeing these themes as separate, Vuong shows how language itself carries emotional histories, be it personal, family-based, or one that is connected to migration. These histories can break apart, change shape, and be imagined again through the way he writes. Using ideas from stylistics, close reading, and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the thesis studies how Vuong's unconventional style (broken sentences, repeated odd structures and punctuations) reflect queer desire and inherited trauma. In *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Vuong writes about the long shadows of the Vietnam War. He uses metaphors that mix past and present, body and memory, showing how second-generation memory feels uncertain and fragile. The broken language in the poems mirrors the unsettled identity of people from the diaspora. In *Time Is a Mother*, the poems deal with grief in both simple and rich ways. The language expresses the confusing, mixed feelings of mourning, while also showing how Vuong tries to understand his queer identity after losing his mother. Across both books, Vuong uses silence, pauses, and slips in language not just for style, but to show the shape of trauma and desire. By following how Vuong's poems turn language into a space for resistance, vulnerability, and remembering, this paper shows that his poetry offers a way for queer and diasporic people to write themselves into existence. Trauma theory is used as a supporting



framework to understand how formal fragmentation reflects themes of grief, war, and personal loss.

INTRODUCTION:

After the modernists unbuilt the tradition of metrical, rhyming poetry in an unprecedented way, surely it does not come entirely as a surprise that poetry has become a fluid genre in the contemporary times. In alternate words, the openness of contemporary poetry is undeniable. It is “merging protest and performance into its practice”, and it is safe to assert that “the era of Conceptual Poetry’s ahistorical nihilism is over and we have entered a new era, the poetry of social engagement” (Rankine & Dowdy, 2018). But, I would risk saying here that contemporary poetry is never formless: abandoning acknowledged form(s) is in itself a form. Furthermore, if we are going by the metric that all literature is political, in the recent years, “critical studies in poetry and poetics have demonstrated the myriad ways in which poets have combined innovation with investigations and assertions of ethnic, racial, and gender subjectivities.” (27)

Individual experiments equally flourish. Ocean Vuong says, “...after five weeks of just getting to know someone’s style, aesthetic and concerns it seems almost dubious, artificial to say, ‘a poem should not do this’ or ‘fiction should have these characters.’” The American-Vietnamese writer is now recognized as one of the most influential contemporary poets, widely known for his unusual and free-spirited style. This unusual and free-spirited style acts as an incentive to the dense subject matters that Vuong is unhesitant to discuss.

Vuong has had an interesting life: Born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1988, was struck deeply by the aftermath of the war and his chaotic family history, spent a year in a refugee camp in the Philippines before emigrating to Connecticut, lived with his seven relatives in a one-bedroom apartment, didn’t learn to read until age 11, worked on a tobacco farm illegally at 15, wrote his debut novel in a closet, and then lost his mother to breast cancer soon after. His life is inseparable from his works; hence, wrote even his debut novel as “fictional autobiography”.

Regarding his poetry, Vuong declares, “linguistically, that poetry is the most innovative medium.” His favourite part about writing poetry is its linguistic play, and that “it feels inexhaustible to manipulate space” in it. His debut collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), published by Copper Canyon, is largely on the subject of the Vietnam war. The aforementioned fact of Vuong and his family living in a refugee camp, waiting to immigrate to the United States, is in fact reflected in the cover photo of the



book. It depicts young Vuong, sitting in a bench between his mother and assumed grandmother, wearing a t-shirt that says, “I love daddy”, whilst the family was living in the refugee. The book does make a lot of father/son references.

The collection earned Ocean Vuong the T. S. Eliot Prize in 2017. He says:

Night Sky was an accumulation of my work as a poet. It was the product of my life manipulating language, which is very short. It took me eight years. So there's never been a work that informed Night Sky specifically; everything has informed me. Night Sky's the sum total of my self-education and experience practicing poems, practicing syntax. (Poetry Foundation)

He furnished a new door to free-verse to discuss experience. Vuong's second poetry collection *Time Is a Mother* (2022), published by Penguin Press, was written by him in a way to cope with the “two days” of the grief from losing his mother, Rose. According to him, it is his most “complete” book (The Guardian).

Apart from talking about his recurrent themes that are close to his life, and using language to illuminate them as hard-hitting, Vuong, like Modernist and contemporary poets, utters poetry in metaphors and symbolism, thereby faithfully maintaining T. S. Eliot's device of expression in art: objective correlative. A lot of the times, we can interpret a poem only by the series of images he provides. For instance, in “Reasons for Staying”, if one time he talks about “A cigarette. A good sweater. On the sagging porch. / While the family sleeps.”, the next moment he emphasizes on “Jonah through the whale”.

Moreover, Vuong's feelings about contemporary English language should not go unnoticed. This is what he says on words of destruction:

In this culture, we celebrate boys through the lexicon of violence. "You're killing it." "Smash them." "Blow them up." "You went into that game guns blazing." And I think it's worth it to ask the question, what happens to our men and boys when the only way they can value themselves is through the lexicon of death and destruction? And I think when they see themselves only worthwhile when they are capable of destroying things, it's inevitable that we arrive at a masculinity that is toxic. (Late Night with Seth Meyers, 2019)

Understanding these characteristics, therefore, shall aid the discussion of Vuong's poetry through stylistics, that this paper attempts to outline.

**AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:**

- To identify stylistic patterns in Vuong's poetry
- To examine the stylistic factors
- To portray the role of Vuong's non-traditional form
- To analytically show that stylistics and the thematic and emotional layers are interconnected
- To understand trauma and other themes better through stylistics

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The existing body of research on Ocean Vuong is still limited, for he is still a very recent contemporary writer, coming into broader academic recognition. While some research has indeed been conducted, it is important to note that the critical attention has been directed mostly towards his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), rather than his poetry. A good example would be ““The truth is memory has not forgotten us”: Memory, Identity and Storytelling” (2021) by Quan Manh Ha and Mia Tompkins, where the discussion is centred on “the intersection of the themes, along with the challenging of “American myths of inclusion and equal opportunity by critiquing the United States’ historical amnesia and imperialistic historiography”. While this work is significant, the primary focus remains on the novel and not on the stylistic dimensions of his poetry.

In “Queering Telemachus: Ocean Vuong, Postmemories and the Vietnam War” (2021) by Kelly Nguyen, the essay explores “how Vuong reworks the Homeric *Odyssey* to create his own ‘postmemories’ of the Vietnam War, using memory theory and the queer perspective. This study provides an important thematic reading of Vuong’s work, especially in relation to war, memory, and queerness.

Jeff Nguyen, in his review of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), explores how Vuong’s poetry “navigates the complexities of the refugee experience”, especially the trauma of the Vietnam War and the struggles of assimilation into American life. Themes such as the “ambivalent legacy of fatherhood, the nurturing influence of female family members, and the poet’s queer identity” are being touched upon.

“Recuperating Exile: Ocean Vuong’s “Night Sky with Exit Wounds”” (2016) by Dan López is one of the critical pieces on Vuong’s “Night Sky with Exit Wounds”, but it is again about exile, trauma, fear, and violence while still contemplating on the possibility of healing, agency, and a fuller life beyond fear.

For Vuong’s “Time Is a Mother”, “At the Beginning of Hope: On Ocean Vuong’s “Time Is a Mother”” (2022) by Donnelle McGee is about the poetry collection transforming grief, inherited trauma, addiction,



queerness, and the afterlife of war, into a poetic meditation on survival, memory, artistic self-creation, and the possibility of choosing joy in spite of devastating loss.

All the other book reviews of both the collections are no different. Therefore, while Vuong writes on momentous themes that are not rarely explored in contemporary poetry, there is but a little to no research that primarily deals his subject matter through the lens of stylistics, even though this blending is highly prominent in his poetry. This dissertation attempts to address that gap by focusing on how stylistic features hold the highest importance alongside the thematic concerns in his poetic works.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

In my conduct of this study, the only best would be to attempt a qualitative textual analysis to examine the stylistic features in the poetry of Ocean Vuong, solely in the collections, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) and *Time Is a Mother* (2022). Primarily textual and interpretative, some selected poems are closely analysed from both the collections, through close reading, with special attention to stylistic elements that include diction, syntax, typography, punctuation, and poetic structure. These examined stylistic features will act as an itinerary in understanding how language functions not merely as a medium of expression but as a structural tool to shape meaning and emotional experience within the poems.

The study further draws on stylistic analysis as its analytical framework. Stylistics allows to explore how linguistic choices contribute to literary meaning. The research investigates how Vuong's poetic language disrupts standardized demands of form and syntax, thereby creating new modes of exhibiting grief, trauma, and queer identity.

The selection of poems is done on the basis of their relevance to the research focus, especially those that prominently display experimental language or unconventional textual structures. The analysis will compare stylistic patterns across the two collections in order to identify recurring techniques and examine how Vuong's poetic style evolves across his works.

Secondary sources include Cathy Caruth's texts on trauma. Trauma theory came into being when Cathy Caruth, Shoshanna Felman and Geoffrey H. Hartman, "moved from deconstruction to trauma studies, as they felt the need to develop new critical tools capable of accounting for the assessment of the Holocaust fiction and the testimonies of survivors" (Onega & Ganteau, 2011). Initiated with Jean Martin Charcot, later developed by Sigmund Freud, trauma as a psychological subject has come a long way and now figures like Caruth, Felman, Judith Herman, Dori Laub, Michelle Balaev, and others have theorized it in the contemporary diverse studies. Caruth recognises trauma as "the response to an unexpected or



overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” and she emphasizes a strong connection between literature and trauma in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Caruth, 1996, p. 103). Caruth argues that traumatic experiences involve a certain paradox, where “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (Caruth, 1996).

Additionally, the idea of intersectionality further aids the study. In the essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”, Kimberle Crenshaw talks about the danger of “single-axis framework” which tends to curtain “the conceptualization, identification and remediation” of co-existing thematic lens, thereby “limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). Hence, intersectionality comes to the rescue, challenging the “the conceptual limitations of the single-issue analyses” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

Vuong’s personal construction of trauma, co-existing with grief and queerness vis-à-vis the above understanding, shall be imparted in the discussion.

ANALYSIS:

I

What makes Vuong’s poetry quintessentially his is when his poetry naturally breaks the conventional norms. In Vuong’s poetry, syntax becomes one of the primary stylistic features through which meaning is constructed and disrupted at the same time. It refers to the particular order in which words and phrases are arranged in a sentence.

The absence of full stops becomes a noticeable stylistic choice. For example, the first three poems in Part I from *Time Is a Mother*, i.e. “Snow Theory”, “Dear Peter” and “Skinny Dipping”, flow without any full stops, but commas are there as pauses. This absence can at times become uncomfortable. In *Time Is a Mother*, the poems are divided into four sections, and the last poem of Part II, i.e. “Scavengers”, feels incomplete because of no full stops, perhaps to denote that the exhaustion of the fisherman is never-ending: “The fisherman / suddenly a boy / with too much to carry”.

The use of dashes appears very randomly. In “Thanksgiving 2006”, he uses only one dash in the poem, to signify a robust truth, “– but I chose to live.” But in the poem “Dear T”, the dashes signify no deeper



meaning. Vuong revealed that “one of [his] heroes is Emily Dickinson”, the classic American poet who was known for her frequent use of dash, who might be his inspiration for the use of the same (Fresh Air, 2023, 30:41). It is crucial to note that Vuong’s control of language distinguishes the need of using dashes from hyphens. For instance, he uses a hyphen in separating two lines, “Crack/ four yolks into a day/ - white bowl, spoon/ the shells” in “Rise and Shine”.

Another distinctive feature about Vuong’s poetry is that his verse shifts fully into the form of prose, a technique that was used even by Shakespeare. It feels odd to label the poems “Nothing” or “The Punctum” other than as tiny essays. But, if we read them according to Vuong’s insistence on pauses and flow, they barely sound prosaic. The reasons for writing in this style can be many. For instance, Caruth mentions in her book that “the trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in having survived”, and this survival of trauma is lurking inside the prose-poetry of “Nothing”. The poem starts with the line “We are shoveling snow, this man and I...” and ends with “It’s really nothing. And I believe you. I shouldn’t, but I do.” It seems like the ordinary act of just living a life is carried on, but inside those two opening and concluding lines, traumatic memories from history are acknowledged (“Peter! she says, Peter! Peter! as if the dead could be called back from rubble into new, stunned bones”), as if they thwart the poetic structure of the prose-poem. Moreover, the poem “Immigrant Haibun” is not a series of stanzas but a series of paragraphs.

The use of epigraphs at the beginning of some poems also shows Vuong’s control over when and how he would convey meaning (keeping it largely open for interpretation at the same time). In “Headfirst”, the epigraph is a Vietnamese proverb, and then a quote from Genesis 1:4 in “Ars Poetica as the Maker”, whereas, the enigmatic “Seventh Circle of Earth” becomes a lot more comprehensible when the epigraph directly informs about a gay couple being murdered, indicating that the poem is written about them.

The gaps between one sentence or a series of sentences reveal Vuong’s unpredictable use of space. For example, there is no spacing between the lines in “The Last Prom Queen in Antarctica”; instead, he keeps the tension through enjambment. He keeps enjambment also in “Rise and Shine”, but he keeps the spacing between three lines each. But it is far from simple. In the poem “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous”, Vuong brings in multiple ideas and images: domestic violence, memories of abuse, loneliness, love, desire, sex, shame, masculinity, momentary beauty, body, and so on. Therefore, he adopts the suitable style to convey his verse without following any pattern. He divides the poem into multiple sections, and in those sections, uses the aforementioned enjambment within the three-line pair, the typical poetic structure with indentations, imbalance in the lines within that structure, paragraph-style,



crisp sentences, long sentences, one word for a line, and one line for one section. Moreover, one cannot ignore how scattered the words appear in “Into the Breach”.

The use of slash becomes another important stylistic feature. In the poem “My Father Writes from Prison”, there is no comma or full stop, but it is simply a poem written in one long paragraph, full of slashes in between the words, “.../ I’m so hungry / a bowl of rice / a cup of you / a single drop /...” In this way, he manages to write in stream of consciousness as well as offers the idea of prison through the words stuck between slashes.

It is not possible to expect capital letters at the beginning of each sentence in Vuong’s poetry. Vuong, just like other contemporary poets, tampers with uppercase letters. Capital letters are abandoned (except for “I”), even in the first word, in poems like “Because It’s Summer”, “Ode to Masturbation”, “Dear Peter”, “Skinny Dipping”, “You Guys”, “Dear Sara”, “Dear T”, and “Toy Boat”. In “No One Knows the Way to Heaven”, the presence of uppercase and lowercase letters in the rest of the poem is used ordinarily, but not in the opening word “but”, as if the poem is the continuation of either the title or a different poem.

The unconventional use of the equal (=) sign in poetry is also present in Vuong’s work. In the poem “Notebook Fragments”, it is used to indicate, for instance, the idea of everything happening for a reason: “Thus no bombs = no family = no me.” This also captures the aftermath of grasping facts, as Caruth says, “trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival” (Caruth, 1996, p. 68).

Vuong almost every time prefers to use ampersands instead of the word “and”. For example, “The boy, beautiful/ & gone...You carve & carve...light appears/ & you get to look in...” Similarly, parentheses [“I’m/ beside you (again)” or even in the title of the poem “Deto(nation)”], underscores (“red_red_red”), “-”, multiplication (“10 × 8 × 4 in/ Winter coat...”), italicized sentences (to capture one’s voices), are used without a second thought in the suitable places.

Additionally, to heighten his poetic exceptionality, it cannot be a mere coincidence that in the poem “In Newport I Watch My Father Lay His Cheek to a Beached Dolphin’s Wet Back”, one line would be on the left side of the book and then the next line would be on the right side, and it continues alternatively. Here, the alternating left–right lines create a visual “river” that fits the poem’s imagery (“waves”, “shore”, “Waves / swallowing / his legs”). That river can be read as the space between past and present, war and America, father and son, violence and tenderness—with the reader’s eye moving back and forth like crossing between shores. This river-like structure is present also in “Of Thee I Sing”, and even if there is



no imagery of water in the poem to support that visual reading, it still works nonetheless, because the poem is about loss (a reflection on the Assassination of John F. Kennedy from the perspective of his wife) and it uncloaks Jackie's struggle with grief, moving between reality and denial, coping with interrupted thoughts and a fractured perception, as her voice says, "I pretend nothing is wrong."

II

Coexistence of ideas is Ocean Vuong's writing fashion, whether intentional or unintentional. Trauma cannot be a sole presence; he makes it intersectional by bringing in the ideas of grief (mostly personal), memory, and queerness. This coexistence has been pointed out also in his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, where destruction and beauty, life and death, hurt and love are inseparable (Oldehus et al., 2025, p. 110)

Trauma is directly introduced in poems like "Aubade with Burning City" and "*Untitled (Blue, Green, and Brown): oil on canvas: Mark Rothko: 1952*", reminiscing the two different events of Vietnamese war and the attacks of 9/11 respectively. So far, we have understood that it is not about what metaphors Vuong use, which he frequently does, but how he utilises them. In "Aubade with Burning City", the provided epigraph clarifies that during the fall of Saigon, on April 29, 1975, the American military evacuated both the American civilians and the Vietnamese refugees through helicopter, calling it "Operation Frequent Wind" (Vuong, 2016). Vuong starts the poem with these words:

Milkflower petals on the street

like pieces of a girl's dress.

May your days be merry and bright...

He fills a teacup with champagne, brings it to her lips.

Open, he says.

She opens.

The chaos and destruction of the "burning city" are depicted as traumatic by the use of juxtaposing images: "milkflower" petals with a girl's dress in pieces, "a white dress" with a soldier's holster, a military truck with the shrieking of children, snow with gunfire, a Christmas song with a black dog "panting in the road." This is executed with Vuong driving his own language. The sexual control is but an internal invasion from the war. The "She opens" is written as one whole line, with indentation from



the previous line, where the soldier commands the girl, “*Open*, he says”, which is written with an indentation from the previous line. This subtly depicts the intrusion.

These two lines also conclude the poem, and in the similar style, after Vuong uses the only dash in the poem. Preceding the dash is a brutal metaphor, which again is written in the poet’s own style: “: a nun, on fire,/ runs silently toward her god –”, an indentation before the second line. The simile, “like pieces of a girl’s dress” is given a line of its own, to intensify the trauma. As Caruth says, “The trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge...and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time” (Caruth, 1995). This unexpected horror is emphasized through certain lines that are italicized in the poem. For instance, “*I’m dreaming. I’m dreaming.../ to hear sleigh bells in the snow...*” or the imagery in the line “*The Treetops glisten and children listen*”, is vivid enough to be triggering, as “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth, 1995). Moreover, Vuong shows in one of the italicized lines, that language falters in shock: “*A white ... A white ... I’m dreaming of...*”

In “*Untitled (Blue, Green, and Brown)*: oil on canvas: Mark Rothko: 1952”, Vuong handles poetics differently, albeit discussing trauma. But he amalgamates the larger tragedy of 9/11 with a personal loss, for which, his common use of ampersand and enjambment works conveniently. If the initial event of trauma is “damage done” (Caruth, 1995), then Vuong highlights it simply plainly with no tactics: “You will always remember what you were doing”, but the emptiness or the inability to express is done poetically: “There is so much / I need to tell you—but I only earned / one life. & I took nothing. Nothing.” On the other hand, the literal news replay of “*The Planes... / The planes...*” is also a traumatic mental replay. From starting with a straightforward fact of “The TV said the planes have hit the buildings”, Vuong, however, ends the poem more subtly, with a closing metaphor that suggests compelled traumatic reminiscence: “You were the window.”

III

But as discussed earlier, trauma can be the recipe, the ingredients of it are unignorable. If the experiences shared by Vuong in his poetry are simultaneously shaped by traumatic memory, queerness, or ethnicity, how would the unconventional poet upgrade his stylistics?

The poem “*Kunstlerroman*” takes a “rewind” button (“red_red_red”), moves backwards from trauma to addiction, violence, poverty, family abuse, death and queer desire, and ultimately reveal the experiences that eventually turned him into a writer. The growing experiences of the speaker as a *kunstlerroman*



include having an abusive father (“His father’s fist retracts from her nose...I might mistake the man’s knuckles for a caress”) and living through the Iraq war (“And the tanks roll out of Iraq...”) at the same time. But, through the AOL chats, through lowercase letters and smaller font size, the poem reveals homophobic-ethnic fetishization: “are you Asian or are you normal?” and “faggot / I need you / fuck you”. The entire poem is written in prose style, without any linear structure. Because, the prose is divided in some parts, but they do not signify anything, as if all the aspects discussed are spread here and there nevertheless. The speaker is probably now “a writer”, receiving a tie from his cousin Victor, but the entire prose is being suffocated with details (“his face looks unfinished”), specifics (“the \$50 bill”), and memories of being gay (“Where he lies very still on the lumpy bed beside a soldier”) and of 9/11 (“the North Tower reconstructs itself and September’s clear and blue again”).

Speaking of memory, in “Seventh Circle of Earth”, Vuong commemorates a gay couple murdered in their own home through immolation. His queer identity takes him to a destination where he not only sympathises with the couple, but also shows empathy. How? Through his stylistics in the poem. The words appear like a “collapsed speech”, and the entire poem is written in footnotes, a place where one gets to tell one’s story (Poetry School, n.d.). This style works immaculately because the whole poem seems to be consisting of seven numbers in scattered way, and nothing else. Those seven numbers act as clues to where the actual poem is hidden, which is in the footnotes. This reflects the compelled concealing nature of queer relationships. Moreover, the poem uses dashes like in “My Father Writes from Prison”, as if the dashes signify the repeated obstacles the couple faced while chasing happiness and settlement in life. Vuong grieves the couple in lines like “we built this house knowing / it won’t last”, or “Our faces blackening / in the photographs along the wall.”

Continuing with grief, Vuong writes the poem “Dear Rose” after he had lost his mother in 2019. Here again, the fear of losing his mother is no doubt echoed in the poem, but he also tries to grieve the death of his uncle (“they shot / my brother you said”) or his childhood pain (“after / the bullies put his face in brown / dirt”). In his purgation, Vuong could not abstain from writing once again on queerness (“what if I said the fastest / finger pointing to you Ma / is me”), cultural displacement (“your father was a white soldier”), violence (“the bullet held / just behind his death”) or ideas like hunger (“you who dreamed / of dipping shreds of chicken / into fish sauce”) and racism (“they nearly killed me / you said for being white”). This extraordinary take on grief is executed like this: the poem consists of an epigraph by Roland Barthes on the sick and dying body of his mother, and then it is written as a meaningless octet. Omitting every comma and full stop, the poem is written in the method of stream of consciousness, echoing the last perplexing chapter of James Joyces’ *Ulysses*. Moreover, it is interesting to note Vuong’s



clever fashion here: his debut epistolary novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, where the narrator writes a letter to his illiterate mother, knowing she would not be able to read it, begins with the opening line, “Let me begin again” (Vuong, 2019). Coincidentally, the poem also starts with the line “Let me begin again now”, perhaps because Vuong wants to certify the nuanced nature of his grief for his mother.

CONCLUSION:

For a long time, it has been impossible to deny that “the world has become so baffling that it is impossible to make sense of it” (Peck & Coyle, 2002). Contemporary writers, therefore, continuously attempt to discover newer literary techniques in order to articulate experiences that often resist ordinary expression. Ocean Vuong, like many contemporary writers, uses unprecedented techniques to cope with his personal battles and emotional realities.

Vuong has always had a distinctive preference:

...and that incantatory power of how a word is uttered is so important to me, but I just thought, I haven't seen it. I can't do this. Poets don't do this. Poets write beautiful sentences that transform the mundane into a kind of uplift. Right? At least that's what I thought I should be doing.
(Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2024)

As discussed throughout the study, Vuong writes on subjects in an intersectional manner, where grief, queerness, trauma, migration, violence, masculinity, and memory exist simultaneously instead of separately. Because of this, his writing style and his themes complement each other. His unconventional stylistics are not merely decorative choices but become necessary methods of expression. Even in his debut novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the plot is not necessarily dense. Instead, he heightens the tension through narrative technique: he believes that the letter is a wonderful technology and a used literary device (Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2024). Vuong wanted to liberate the readers to “eavesdrop” and become a “voyeur” rather than read the book as a “anthropological tour bus to show what it is like to be Vietnamese-American” (Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2024).

Furthermore, poetry liberates one to be themselves within the literary space. Vuong is all too familiar with identity crisis, having belonged to the LGBTQ+ community and being of Vietnamese origin. His poetry therefore becomes a space where fragmented identities, inherited memories, and emotional vulnerability can coexist without resolution.



The massive use of imagery and metaphor gives the poems meaning, but Vuong's stylistics intensifies them and opens the door for the readers to empathy. Through fragmented syntax, scattered spacing, unusual punctuation, enjambment, prose-like structures, and visual experimentation, the poems embody the emotional instability they attempt to portray. His poetry does not simply narrate trauma or grief; rather, the stylistic construction itself performs those experiences.

Vuong's fascination with language is further visible in the way he plays with letters and words. For instance, the repeated "a b c a b c a" in "The Gift", or spelling out "m-a-p-l-e-s" in "Dear T". Such experimentation demonstrates his constant attempt to stretch language beyond conventional poetic expectations. In fact, his stylistics make it difficult to quote him conventionally, because the meaning often lies not only in the words themselves but also in their placement, spacing, interruption, and visual arrangement on the page.

Therefore, this paper comes to the conclusion, that stylistics plays a pivotal role in understanding Vuong's poetry. His unconventional language allows him to represent complex emotional and historical experiences, in ways that traditional poetic structures may not fully accommodate. Through stylistic experimentation, Vuong creates in poetry, a space of memory, resistance, vulnerability, and self-expression. After all, as Vuong once said, "finishing the poem does not complete it. It is complete only when a reader reads it."

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