

“The Narrative Obsession”: Franck Venaille and the Art of Telling in Verse and Prose

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Abstract

Since Mallarmé, modern French poetry has privileged lyricism over storytelling, establishing a theoretical divide between verse and narrative prose. However, Franck Venaille’s work challenges this dichotomy by embracing narrative within innovative formal structures. This article examines *La Descente de l’Escaut* (1995), a poem that blends verse and prose to create new narrative dynamics. Through varied typographical arrangements and enunciative modulations, Venaille demonstrates that prose is not merely prosaic material but an essential component of contemporary poetic form. His work illustrates how modern poetry can revive the epic tradition while maintaining formal innovation, proving that the boundaries between verse and prose become increasingly permeable when unified within a single poetic framework.

1 Introduction

For nearly a century, the history of modern French-language poetry has been marked by a “theoretical exclusion of narrative” (Combe 1989). While for centuries in France, writing in verse was synonymous with storytelling, poetry underwent a radical change beginning with Mallarmé. Furthermore, this rejection of narrative in favor of a practice of pure poetry led to a reshaping of genre rhetoric. The gradual removal of the secular triad (lyric, dramatic, epic) resulted in a simpler distinction between poetry and narrative, along with a dichotomy that assigned verse to poetic practice and prose to the art of storytelling. Since then, examples have shown the possibility of reintegrating narrative into versification (*La vie est unique* by Georges Perros, or *Chêne et chien* by Raymond Queneau). Debates subsequently fueled French contemporary poetic creation in the 1980s and 1990s, focusing specifically on the possibility of writing verse using material derived from prose (Collet 2016). The use of such material provoked controversy because, on one hand, prose is mainly used for its narrative qualities (which, according to convention, makes it unsuitable for prosody),

and on the other hand, is often regarded as prosaic (and thus lacking poetic qualities).

During the last decade of the 20th century, the concept of “poetic form” was heavily debated in France. It sparked a major issue in *Action poétique*, which took its title from the question Henri Deluy and Jacques Roubaud sent to over forty poets in a survey: “Is the poetic form going to, can it, must it disappear?” (« La forme poétique va-t-elle, peut-elle, doit-elle disparaître ? »). By choosing this title for the thematic section, the editors implied that the “form” of poetry they referred to was that of the mid-19th century—namely, verse. While Pascal Boulanger suggests that the answers reveal “two opposing tendencies” (« deux tendances opposées », Boulanger 1998), all these different viewpoints emphasize the value of prose. For Roubaud and Deluy, in addition to preserving existing poetic forms, it is crucial to “go and search for the forms of poetry within prose” (« aller chercher les formes de poésie dans la prose », Roubaud and Deluy 1993–1994). Emmanuel Hocquard also emphasizes that poetry is “no more a genre than prose” (« pas plus un genre que la prose », Hocquard 1993, p. 58), while also highlighting their close relationship. In an earlier issue published the same year, Pierre Alferi tried to dismiss the idea that poetry can be defined by meters; for him, the key process involves “putting into rhythm” through line breaks and prosody, considering the moment “when something—from prose—precipitates into poetry” (« l’instant où quelque chose — de la prose — se précipite en poésie », Alferi 1993–1994).

For his part, Franck Venaille (1936–2018) stayed away from these debates and seemed to develop his work in an environment marked by the solitude that came with his illness, which might explain why he was not among the poets who participated in the survey. However, the assertion of prose as a fully realized form in *La Descente de l’Escaut* represents, in my view, a significant contribution to the question raised by the poetry journal. For Venaille, the forme-poésie must draw on the expressive potential of prose—its sentence structure and narrative flow, its length, its compactness—to maintain its vitality. There is thus no such thing as the poetic form understood as a fixed category, but rather a diversity of poetic forms, of which prose is an essential part. Furthermore, within Venaille’s approach, prose seems to serve a creative role: as we will see, its characteristics and qualities fuel the formal innovation present in *La Descente de l’Escaut*, a work where prose material lends itself to a variety of typographic arrangements.

This question has recently been reexamined from a linguistic and enunciative perspective by Michèle Monte, whose book *La Parole du Poème* (Monte 2022) eloquently demonstrates that narrative is naturally part of the enunciative scenography in many contemporary poems, both in verse and prose. Her study provides a useful framework for reconsidering Venaille’s own approach, which specifically investigates how narrative can develop within poetic language itself.

Venaille’s work exemplifies how modern poetry has adopted prose to innovate formally and revive traditional verse practices. In his case, this revival is accompanied by a focus on narrative, often in the form of autobiographical poetry. While Venaille is fixated on the formal aspects of poetry, he describes himself as “obsessed with narration” (Venaille 2003, p. 133), and his work demonstrates an ability to go beyond simple genre boundaries. Using his book *La Descente*

de l'Escaut (Venaille 1995) as a reference, I aim to show how the blending and coexistence of verse and prose allow him to create new narrative dynamics within a poetic framework.

2 The "Book" and the Poem: Contemporary Possibilities of Narration

The exclusion of narrative in modern poetry is a theoretical idea; it is important to highlight this nuance introduced by Dominique Combe. Although this exclusion has been claimed and theorized by poets themselves, it has not been consistently implemented in practice. According to Combe, it influences the poem both in its structural principle and through verb tenses and rhythms that shape it. Nonetheless, the narrative remains virtual and fragmented (Combe 1989).

Franck Venaille also considers this question from a contemporary poet's perspective, asking: "Can poetry be narrative, and to what extent?" (« La poésie peut-elle être narrative, et à quelle dose ? », Venaille 2010, p. 109). In this text, Venaille contrasts two ways of understanding and reading poetry. He suggests that a poem can initially be read "alone" and appreciated for its inherent qualities. Venaille sees this as the approach favored by most poetry collections: the collection gathers individual poems that stand on their own. In contrast, other poets craft true sets of poems by "working with duration, history, narrative, and the relationship to plot" (Venaille 2010, p. 109). This allows for a dual approach: first, reading the poem as it is, and second, stepping back for a broader reading at the collection level, paying attention to how the poems interact—"expressing a story within the story" (« exprimant ainsi une histoire dans l'histoire », Venaille 2010). Thus, the collection (*recueil*) differs from the Book (*Le Livre*, to borrow Mallarmé's phrase); its organization is no longer fixed but dynamic, creating multiple interpretations through narratives that "circumvent", "oppose", or "link" the poems together (Venaille 2010, p. 110). As a result, narrative is no longer only found within a single poem but also infiltrates the organization of a book of poems, shaping it through its architecture of a collective, adopting a broad perspective.

Venaille references two contemporary poets, Alain Veinstein and Claude Royet-Journoud, to support his argument, despite their differing practices. Their poetics can be linked to the movement of "literality", which emphasizes grammatical processes and statements—a perspective inherited from American objectivism. Drawing on Lang (2021), Félix Katikakis provides a helpful summary of what objectivism involves: "Objectivist poetry is understood either as a 'poetry-object'—that is, as a quest for objectification, an attempt to make the poem an object in its own right [...]—or as a 'poetry of objects', that is, a pursuit of objectivity and sincerity" (« la poésie objectiviste est comprise tantôt comme une 'poésie-objet', autrement dit comme une quête d'objectification, une tentative de faire du poème un objet à part entière, [...] tantôt comme une 'poésie des objets', autrement dit comme une quête d'objectivité, de sincérité », Katikakis 2022). This approach focuses more on expressing external reality than

conveying subjectivity. In Royet-Journoud's case, this results in highly minimal work centered on the typography of the poem, "in which the words seem to have escaped to tell their own story" (« dans laquelle les mots semblent s'être échappés afin de raconter aussi leur propre histoire », Venaille 2010, p. 110). Venaille is interested in the visual form of the text on the page. The collection, which is the focus of this study, includes nearly 20 layouts, each contributing to the narration of a single "story". For this reason, the book is explicitly labeled "Poem" in its subtitle (*La Descente de l'Escaut - Poème*), evoking the epic tradition and its long poem. Regardless of its formal and stylistic expression, poetic narrativity raises a fundamental question: the challenge of reconnecting with the epic tradition of narrative in verse while modernizing it through innovative approaches.

Published in 1995, this book is rooted in a specific biographical context: the poet had been living with Parkinson's disease for several years, and to fight the illness, he set out on an initiatory journey along the Escaut River. He walked more than 300 kilometers, sharing his impressions daily over the phone. These included descriptions of the landscape around him, combined with introspective reflections on the existential meaning of this journey.

In unpublished notes we examined at the Institut Mémoires de l'Édition contemporaine (which, from a genetic perspective, serve as the primary source for the future poem), Venaille considers the nature of his upcoming book, viewing it as "both a novel and a travel journal" (« À la fois un roman et un journal de voyage », Venaille 1989). Concerning the published version, its clearly narrative nature is evident in the title: as a poem, *La Descente de l'Escaut* aims to tell a story, similar to long romantic poems and epics, with some intertextual links to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The excerpt, echoing a reimagining of the beginning of the "Inferno", outlines the narrative framework of this personal epic, depicting a man fighting illness and seeking through the waters of the river:

Je suis un homme perdu dans ce bois de hêtres
Glissant sur les bords fangeux du fleuve Je
suis malade Mais, dès le premier ponton de bois
Je resurgis, semblable en cela à cette eau nocturne
nommons-la : Force et Faiblesse ! Mirage !
[...]

(Venaille 1995, p. 90)

I am a man lost in this beechwood
Slipping along the muddy banks of the river I
am sick But, from the very first wooden jetty
I re-emerge, akin in this to the nocturnal water
let us name it: Strength and Weakness! Mirage!
[...]

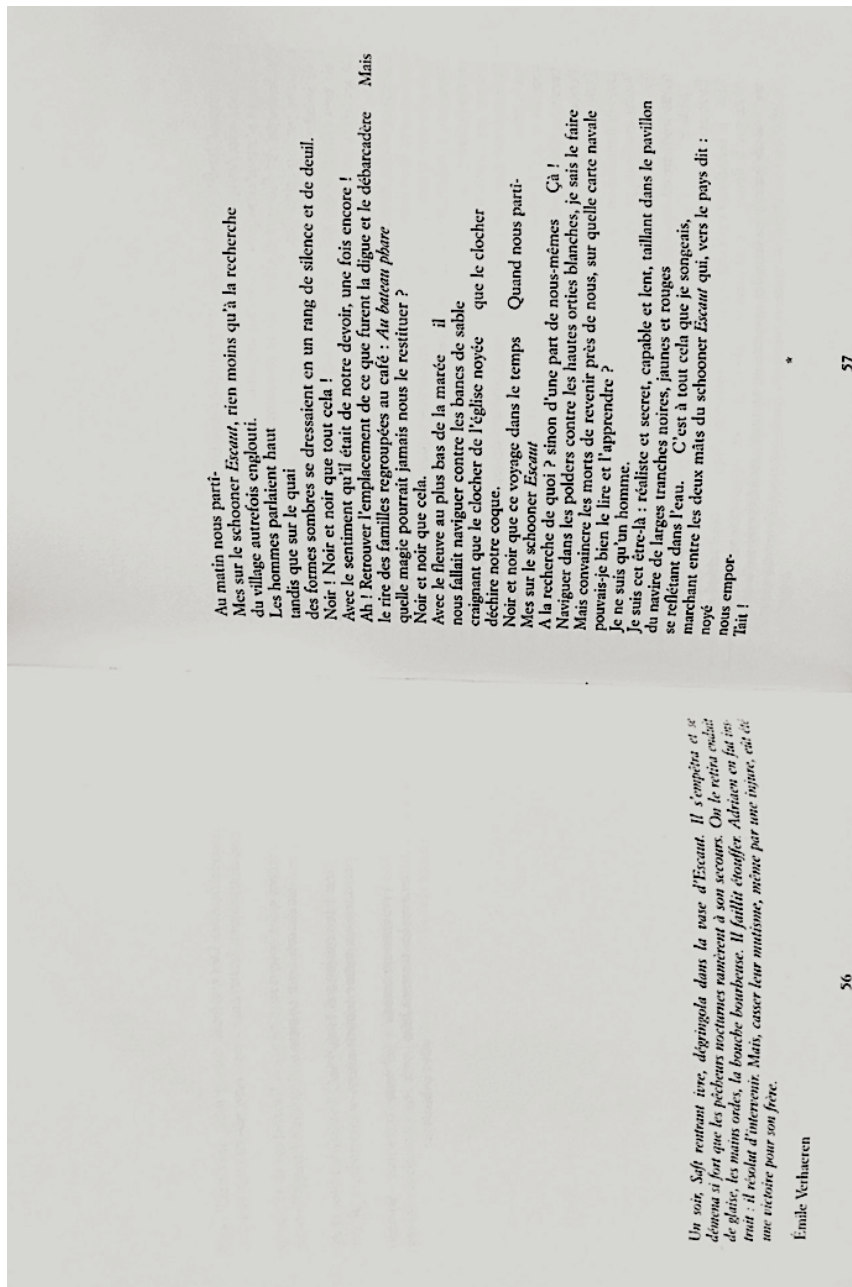
(Venaille 1995, p. 90)

The book's complex structure depends on an interweaving of poetic forms and citations. These citations come from stories by Belgian authors, chosen because they evoke the Escaut River (ranging from Charles de Coster to Hugo Claus, Émile Verhaeren, and Henri Michaux). When placed alongside Venaille's texts,

they are often quite lengthy, unlike the traditional epigraphs found at the start of certain poetry sections. They create a textual collage and engage in a dialogue with the Poem, sometimes visually blending with it (see [Figure 1](#)). Moreover, as fragments of stories, these citations help build the overall narrative of the poem despite its fragmented and disjointed nature. They also showcase various enunciative configurations, which is significant because Venaille's text relies on highly fluctuating enunciative dynamics. As a "zone of transaction" ([Genette 1987](#), p. 8), this extensive paratext, created by the epigraphs, forms a book within the book; it makes Venaille's Poem another part of this thematic collection about the Escaut. Venaille, a French poet, thus achieves his dream: to become a Belgian poet—the paratext also serving as that "privileged site of a pragmatics and a strategy" ([Genette 1987](#), p. 8). Ultimately, this transtextuality could be examined through the perspective of editorial enunciation ([Souchier 1998](#)). This concept refers to "the plural elaboration of the textual object" ([Souchier 1998](#), p. 141), meaning the text results from a polyphonic collaboration involving "any entity likely to intervene in the conception, realization, or production of the book or of any medium or device combining text, image, and sound" ([Souchier 1998](#), p. 141). Editorial enunciation is therefore "that through which the text can exist materially, socially, culturally in the eyes of the reader" ([Jeanneret and Souchier 2005](#), p. 6). In Venaille's case, the visual merging of Belgian excerpts with his verses exemplifies this editorial effort: the layout choices, typographic consistency between citations and original text, and the physical integration of these diverse fragments all contribute to creating a hybrid textual object that materializes the poet's desire for assimilation into the Belgian literary scene.

Furthermore, it is crucial to identify another intertextual source for this work: Schubert's *Winterreise*. Indeed, Venaille mentioned in an interview ([1993](#)) that each section of the book alludes Lieder from that cycle. Overall, the Schubertian cycle is exactly that: a sung tale about a walking man. Three kinds of narrative (poetic, novelistic, and musical) intersect within Venaille's poem's intertextual framework, and this polyphonic aspect is reflected in the poet's uses of varied tonalities—not only lyrical or epic but also elegiac.

Concerning the book's composition, Venaille emphasizes that it is based on nine prose pieces, which serve as the "foundation of the book, documenting the water walker's singular experience of the journey" (« forment les assises du livre, témoignant de ce regard unique porté sur l'aventure qu'est en train de vivre le marcheur d'eau », [Venaille 2010](#), p. 113). This statement underscores the book's originality: these prose pages not only form the basis of the "Poem" but also possess a poetic quality equivalent to that of the other texts. These prose pieces are not "prose poems" in the modern tradition (such as Aloysius Bertrand's *Gaspard de la nuit* or Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose*); they extend over more pages, and their typographical layout sets them apart from traditional prose poems (which are often centered on the page with narrower justification than continuous prose). Despite these formal differences, Venaille defends their poetic status by coining the term *poème de prose* in opposition to *poème en prose* to define them: "it seems to me that they do not differ in any way from the tonality of the other poems, which are presented in a very recognizable form that immediately evokes what we traditionally consider poetry to be" (« ce texte

Figure 1: Visual blending of Belgian citations with Venaille's verses in *La Descente de l'Escaut*

ne diffère en rien me semble-t-il de la tonalité des autres poèmes, présentés, eux, sous une forme très reconnaissable évoquant d'emblée l'image que l'on se fait dans nos contrées de la poésie », [Venaille 2010](#), p. 113). Furthermore, he explains that "they are the elements of a whole designed to utilize the fullest range of forms in the poetic repertoire" (« des éléments d'un ensemble qui entend utiliser le maximum de formes existant dans le catalogue poétique », [Venaille 2010](#), p. 114). Reading the book reveals an extensive catalogue of poetic forms.

The opening text switches between monostichs and distichs with relatively short lines. The following piece also consists of distichs, though these are significantly longer. The third text is the first *poème de prose*, and a close look at how these texts begin reveals a connection between them. The book's overall coherence emerges through echoes and recurring motifs that interweave various themes and micro-narratives throughout the Poem. The book features many other layouts, with differences especially noticeable on facing pages, such as a single stanza of free verse opposite a triple-spaced paragraph of prose (see [Figure 2](#)). Here one observes what might be called a "reshaping" of prose—that is, a process that alters the conventional appearance of prose by adjusting its visual layout. On the right page, the spacing creates a perceptual effect: the reader's eye moves more slowly from the beginning to the end of each prose line than usual.

Particularly striking is the significant variation produced by these layouts, especially when comparing dense prose blocks with expansive heterometric verse poems, or lines composed of one or two words (see [Figure 3](#) and [Figure 4](#)). The final section of the poem published in 1995 comprises four center—justified texts. Their lines are left-aligned, except for the first one, which is slightly indented—a subtle disruption of absolute regularity. In contrast to the book's dominant tendency, the lines in these texts are extremely short. Most lines contain only one or two words, thus emphasizing the poem's vertical dimension. The text's form, through systematic fragmentation of its syntactic units, reflects the downward movement evoked by the infinitive form ("to descend"), which reads as an imperative to oneself. The lines—monosyllabic or disyllabic—fall in succession, leading to the next syntagm, in time with the walker's progression. Despite the formal heterogeneity most evident in the typography, the narrative unfolds; it remains to examine what narrative dynamics these varied arrangements produce.

3 Verse Layout: Narrative and Enunciative Fragmentations

This section examines the texts and observe how different narrative dynamics manifest themselves in a context that initially appears experimental, particularly from a visual standpoint. I begin by exploring the various ways narrative manifests itself within texts arranged in what traditionally constitutes verse.

Il traversa ce *Village à vendre* où
pas même un chien ne lui apparut
Seul : le soleil, blanc, comme une

Les heures les heures les heures et les heures
 Ou, lourdement, il allait marcher le long du fleuve
 Sans rien en lui de gracie et d'heureux Mais
 Au contraire : courbé, ployant sous son poids primitif d'
 Homme blessé blessé de jour en jour davantage blessé et
 Humilié de se voir : semblable à ce rat le suivant
 En appui sur la vase. Soleil ! Un grand soleil. Ce bien
 Étrange soleil blanc matinal ! Tandis que l'animal
 Effrayait même les lourdes si lourdes trop lourdes
 pierres d'eau.

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Chaque nuit, une invisible main déversait de la boue sur les berges du
 fleuve et, impuissant, le corps traversé de spasmes d'angoisse j'
 assistais à ce lent travail, cet incessant combat d'une matière mauvaise
 et noire. Je me tenais debout. Préférant l'anxieuse immobilité, cher-
 chant vainement à voir, comprendre, saisir le sens profond de ce
 geste tellurique. Lorsque, chaque nuit, ces longs doigts invisibles à
 tous laissaient glisser dans l'eau ce dépôt d'abjection minérale sem-
 blant grouiller d'animaux — que dis-je là ! — d'êtres, remplis d'une
 misère profonde, s'accouplant, forniquant, se repaissant des plus
 faibles d'entre eux (les plus misérables) et l'eau vibrail, tremblait,
 tentant de fuir, de s'échapper, d'élargir son domaine vers des terres
 plus humaines ! Comme je ressentais cette douleur ! Et combien de fois
 me suis-je surpris à prendre parti, à haïr même cette matière noire et
 mauvaise. Pourquoi ? Et d'où provenait mon incapacité à prononcer ces

mots simples : vase et boue ?

•

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Figure 2: Contrasting layouts in *La Descente de l'Escalier*: free verse opposite triple-spaced prose

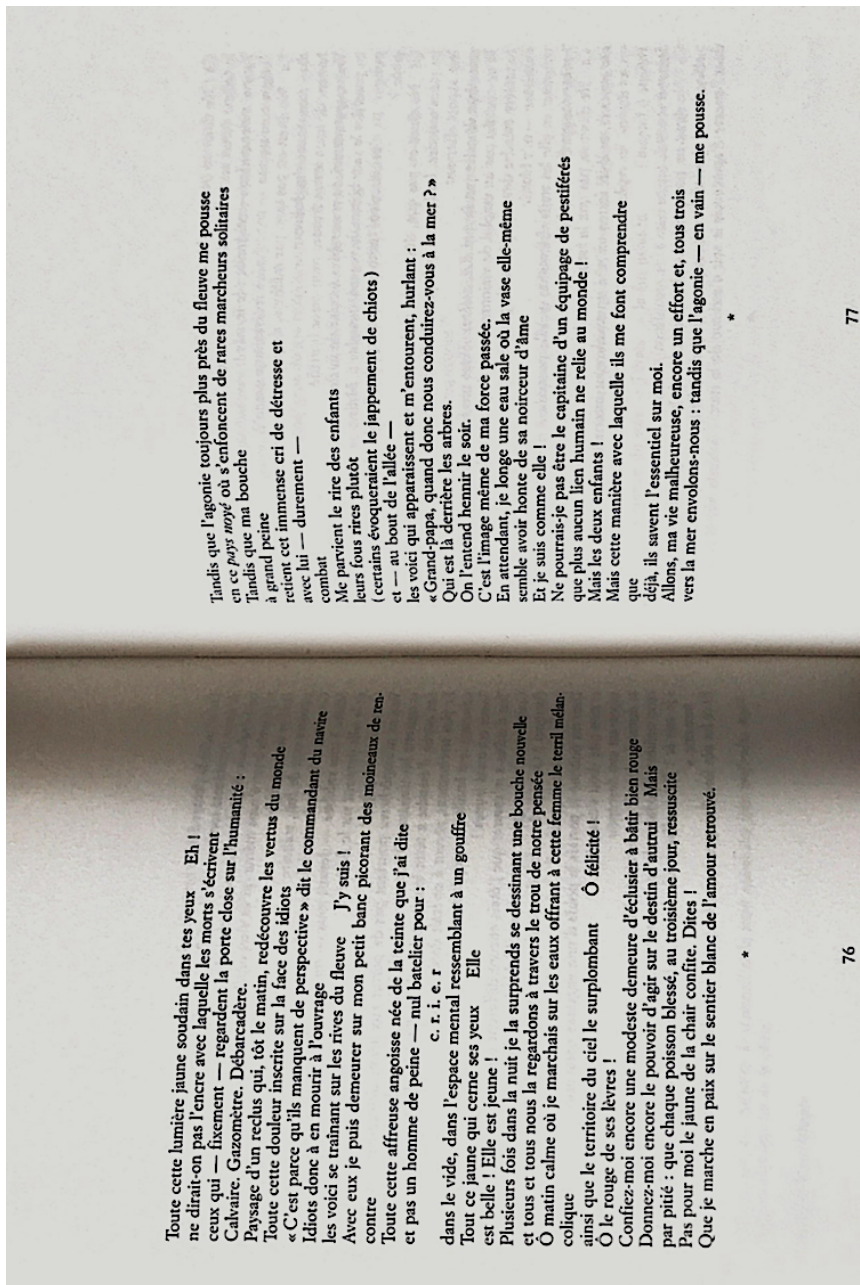


Figure 3: Dense prose block in *La Descente de l'Escout*

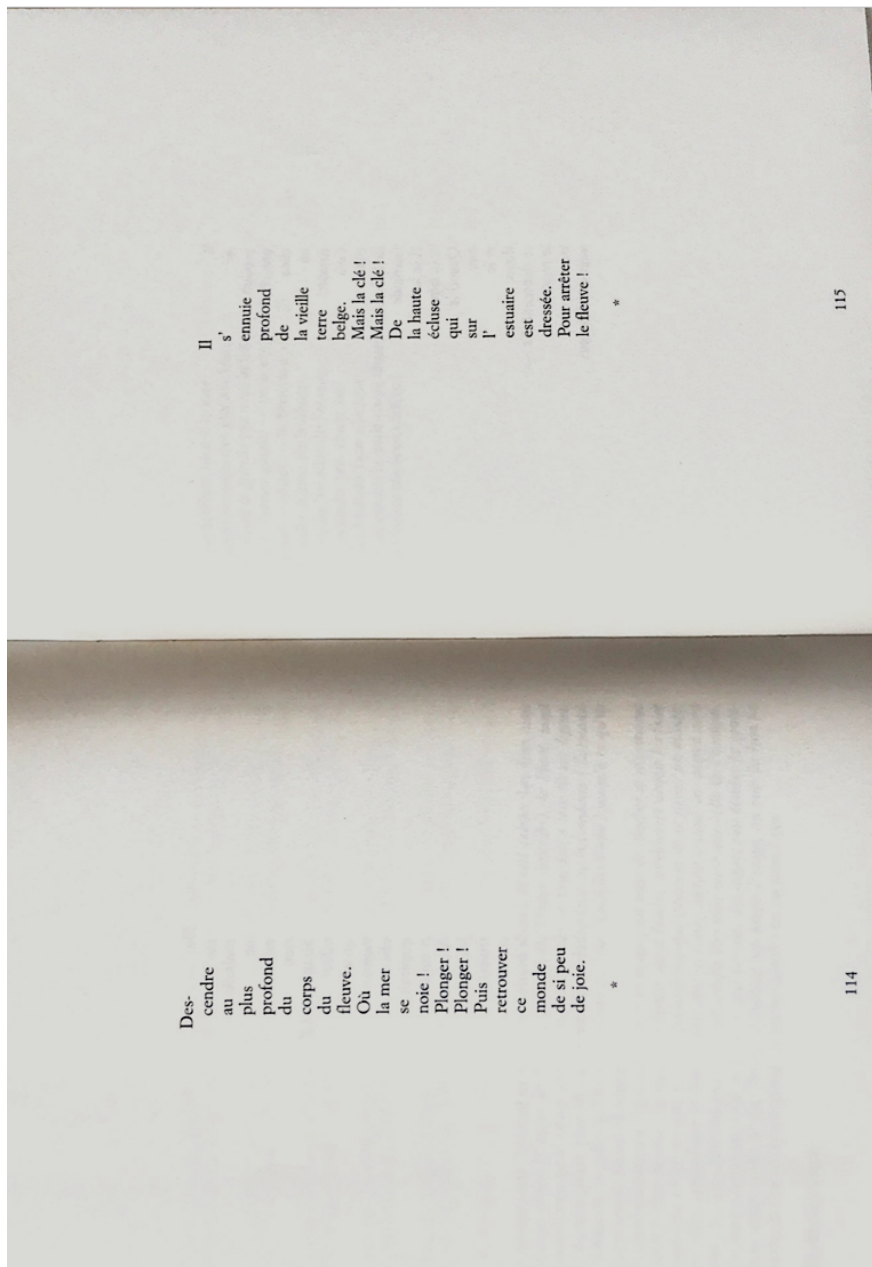


Figure 4: Minimal vertical composition with monosyllabic lines

hostie sale et livide ô combien !
Seul : tel cet homme qui, dans le
fleuve court, c'est cela, se jeter !

(Venaille 1995, p. 18)

He crossed this *Village for sale* where
not even a dog appeared to him
Alone: the sun, white, like a
dirty and pallid host, oh, how pale!
Alone: like that man who, in the
swift river, yes, to throw himself !

(Venaille 1995, p. 18)

The six-line stanza offers an example of "minimal narrative" (Combe 2012). The narrative dimension is particularly clear from the outset: the simple past tense clearly signals a narrative impulse. However, the verse form permits an abrupt interruption. The absence of punctuation after the second line leaves this micro-narrative suspended, as the third line shifts to the epithet "Seul" (alone), followed by a colon, which serves a presentational function. Narration gives way to a description of the sun based on a metaphorical comparison; then the text adopts a lyrical tone ("oh!"). The final two lines introduce two processes, both essential to the poem's structure. First, the prominent use of repetitive structures, which appears designed to mimic the rhythm of song (or *Lieder*, considering the importance of the Schubertian model). Second, the manipulation of enunciation; within the same poem, a shift occurs from the third person to a focus on a character ("this man"), which could signal a fictional scenario (the narrator imagining someone throwing himself into the river) or could establish a new enunciative perspective (if one reads "this man" as equivalent to the narrator). In this reading, the transition offers the reader a different narrative perspective, thereby duplicating the initial subject and offering an alternative perspective of the walker's experience.

Another example demonstrates how the varied line lengths—what would be termed heterometry in a traditional versification system—underscore narrative dispersal:

Des silhouettes semblaient danser dans la brume	et	
un instant		
il crut que son voyage s'arrêterait là :		
près de ce brasero		
contre cette benne renversée dans la boue		5
sous le bras décharné d'une grue tentant vainement d'agripper le ciel.		
Il eut peur !		
Agression — vol — viol — passage à tabac :		
telles furent quelques-unes des scènes qui, soudain, éclatèrent		
longeant ce brasero		10
où des êtres, précédant semblait-il la sociabilité du monde		
piétinaient et		
sur lui		
jeterent un regard morne.		
[...] Aujourd'hui encore, je ne sais pas s'il s'agissait d'un fantasme		15

dû à l'emprise matinale
ou de l'un de ces désirs
qu'à soi-même
l'on n'ose confier.

(Venaille 1995, p. 26)

Silhouettes seemed to dance in the mist	and	
for a moment		
he thought his journey would end there:		
by that brazier		
by the overturned dumpster in the mud		5
under the withered arm of a crane vainly trying to grasp the sky.		
He was afraid!		
Assault — theft — rape — beating:		
such were some of the scenes that, suddenly, erupted		
alongside that brazier		10
where beings, as if preceding the world's sociability,		
trampled		
and upon him		
cast a dull gaze.		
[...] Even today, I do not know if it was a fantasy		15
born from the morning's hold		
or one of those desires		
one does not dare		
confide to oneself.		

(Venaille 1995, p. 26)

Here, narration is dramatized through typographical devices. Multiple techniques achieve this dramatization, beginning with the right indentation (v. 1), which creates whitespace thereby building suspense, amplified by the visual isolation of the phrase (“un instant”, v. 2). More broadly, line breaks emphasize narrative elements, enhancing dramatization (“Il eut peur!”, v. 7) as well as the two instances where the line ends with a colon (v. 3 and 8). Other texts (Venaille 1995, p. 61) also features abrupt enjambments that split individual words, which prove even more striking in their disruption of linear reading.

The “narrative interlacing” and “dispersion of enunciation” (Courtois 2019, p. 2) throughout the poem are reinforced by typographical devices. The text’s enunciative complexity ultimately lies in revealing the narrator’s perspective, much like that in novelistic narration. Having established the narrative through past tenses such as the imperfect and simple past, along with temporal markers like “un instant” and “soudain”, an expression signaling uncertainty appears: “Je ne sais pas s’il s’agissait d’un fantasme” (v. 15). As Jean-Patrice Courtois emphasizes, the poetic mode also allows the “narrator” to become the “reader of his own story”. This becomes especially interesting when one observes the variation in what Courtois terms the “nominal respondents of the narrator” (“le marcheur d’eau”, “la sentinelle”, “l’homme blessé”, etc.). Each new text appears to generate, in what Venaille himself describes as “an ensemble that intends to use the maximum number of forms existing in the poetic catalogue”, a new perspective through which the narrator views his own story, renewed through formal transitions.

Each formal arrangement also suggests a new mode of storytelling. Nevertheless, within a poetic structure that emphasizes line arrangements, another text merits analysis:

J'entrai en ville par ce long égout : territoire du dessous où flottent les robes
des Sœurs-Noires.

L'eau de la solitude : tel ce grand verre de Blanche bu au comptoir du boulevard
vide.

Juste cette ampoule verte devant moi dans la brume. Juste cette douleur d'être 5
lié à ce monde sans joie.

J'avais. Dans le silence blanc des carrières vides. Mains couvertes de talc : ô
Pauvre ouvrier navré !

Saules et peupliers dansant sure le parquet liquide. Rituel de la petite messe des
noyés. Ô ! 10

(Venaille 1995, p. 48)

I entered the city through this long sewer: territory of the underworld where the robes
of the Black Sisters float.

The water of solitude: like that tall glass of Blanche drunk at the counter of the empty
boulevard.

Just that green bulb before me in the mist. Just that pain of being 5
tied to this joyless world.

I moved forward. In the white silence of empty quarries. Hands covered in talc: oh
Poor disheartened worker!

Willows and poplars dancing on the liquid floor. Ritual of the small mass for
the drowned. Oh ! 10

(Venaille 1995, p. 48)

The narrative's rhythm here follows different patterns: first binary (v. 1–3), then ternary (v. 4–5). The verses comprise multiple segments, separated by colons (serving an introductory function) and often by periods. Unlike, for example, the *versets* found in the works of Paul Claudel or Saint-John Perse, these do not depend on the unity of "breath" and do not aim to develop extended syntactic periods, but rely on ellipsis. The narration remains direct and concise, and the images it presents invite the reader to forge connections and associations. This example demonstrates the coexistence of storytelling and poetry. As the poem progresses, the narrative increasingly takes on a lyrical tone that tends toward abstraction.

The form of the verse here proves well suited to listing the narrator's various actions and visions, facilitating a mixture of tenses. Its spatial arrangement on the page isolates and emphasizes events, while their juxtaposition creates micro-narratives. "The poet-narrator thus resembles the novelist of interiority, one who makes language itself the object of his work"; this notion, proposed by Franck Venaille, certainly applies to these texts of *La Descente de l'Escaut*. The stream of consciousness is no longer limited to continuous prose narratives: the diverse structures employed by Venaille demonstrate how verse can serve

narrative purposes while disrupting narrative linearity. One final example illustrates how a verse layout can disrupt narration:

Sans cesse La grande bouche agissait Et
 dans l'estuaire déversait son flot lai-
 teux de bile où les vagues Où les va-
 gues, prises au piège, l'une après l'au-
 tre, venaient se noyer Moi je n'étais que
 le voyageur impuissant, l'homme à la barre
 du cargo Babtai, évitant les îles, les bancs
 de sables nés de la nuit Vomis par la gran-
 de bouche féminine

(Venaille 1995, p. 104)

Ceaselessly The great mouth worked And
 in the estuary poured its milky flow
 of bile where the waves Where the wa-
 ves, rapped, one after ano-
 ther, came to drown I was nothing but
 the helpless traveller; the man at the helm
 of the cargo ship Babtai, avoiding the islands, the sandbanks
 born of the night Spewed forth by the great
 feminine mouth

(Venaille 1995, p. 104)

Here, the absence of major punctuation marks (such as the full stop, semicolon, or exclamation mark), combined with the apparently arbitrary capitalization of certain words without a clear grammatical reason, disorients the reader. Indeed, only the capitalization of the first word follows conventional rules, marking the poem's opening. For the other five words, capitalization creates a break, comparable to traditional line breaks. In one instance, capitalization marks a repetition ("Où les vagues", v. 3). Capital letters function as visual markers that interrupt the fluid reading typical of prose; rather than organizing the narrative (clearly illustrated by the use of the imperfect tense), they fracture what begins as seamless syntax. Moreover, the syntax frequently extends beyond verse boundaries, as four line endings demonstrate (2, 3, 4, and 8) splitting disyllabic words in half. Ultimately, the structured verse form complicates direct apprehension of the story told in the first person. The reader must re-assemble narrative fragments that demand understanding through both visual disruptions and distinctive rhythm, as Venaille's typographical choices suggest.

4 Prose, or the Shaping of Narratives

If walking can be seen as a repetitive activity because it is almost mechanical, the narrative offered by Franck Venaille deeply opposes repetition and favors a principle of variation. The walk along the river leads to numerous forms, sometimes shaped by the river's movement and dynamics. Despite this formal diversity, the shape of prose still seems very important. As we have shown before, alongside pages that feature a traditional arrangement of free verse,

we observe what look like blocks of prose of different sizes (with variations in justification). The ambiguity lies in the fact that these blocks or squares are justified to the right, making them resemble a paragraph of prose.

J'allais Je marchais le long de cette nudité
 apaisante Je fis un vaste usage de la solitu-
 De et des marées, vivantes ô combien ! Je fus
 celui qui s'interrogeait : cette aventure so-
 litaire le long d'un fleuve qui ne me rejetait
 pas Dites ! Était-elle vraiment agissante sur
 le monde ?

(Venaille 1995, p. 62)

I went I walked along that soothing
 nudity I made vast use of solitude
 and the tides, oh how alive! I was
 the one who questioned: this solitary
 journey along a river that did not cast me
 away Tell me! Was it truly at work
 in the world ?

(Venaille 1995, p. 62)

The lines are not only justified but also conglomerated; Gerald Purnelle (2006) describes this as *vers de prose* (line of prose). Once again, we observe irregularities in punctuation within these blocks: no periods, but capital letters guiding the measure. Narrative tenses are used again, but along with the lyrical register characteristic of the entire poem: exclamation and question marks, interaction with the reader ("dites!")—which also serve as a dialogue of the narrator with himself—as we see the frequent use of the second person plural throughout the book. Let's compare this poem in *vers de prose* with the last text analyzed as a poem in verse. We notice that what differentiates them is ultimately very subtle: their structure appears very similar, with the only difference being the justification. The hybridization of verse and prose, from a formal perspective, effectively blurs the boundaries between narrative and lyricism. In fact, markers like exclamation and question marks, interjections, and vocatives might initially seem to contribute solely to the poem's lyrical dimension; however, they also serve to anchor the narrative discourse, as they accompany the lyrical subject's speech. Going down the river is primarily an initiatory journey in which the individual sets out in search of themselves.

Elsewhere, we clearly see how typographical choices shape prose. For example, the decision to double the line spacing:

Chaque nuit, une invisible main déversait de la boue sur les berges du
 fleuve et, impuissant, le corps traversé de spasmes d'angoisse j'
 assistais à ce lent travail, cet incessant combat d'une matière mauvaise
 et noire. Je me tenais debout. Préférant l'anxieuse immobilité, cher-
 chant vainement à voir, comprendre, saisir le sens profond de ce
 geste tellurique [...]

(Venaille 1995, p. 17)

Each night, an invisible hand poured mud onto the riverbanks, and,

powerless, my body wracked with spasms of anguish I witnessed this slow labour; this relentless struggle of a foul and dark substance. I stood there. Preferring anxious immobility, vainly trying to see, understand, grasp the deep meaning of this telluric gesture [...]

(Venaille 1995, p. 17)

Here is a text punctuated like prose, presenting complete syntax. What disrupts the traditional dynamics of reading is the greater spacing between lines. Cognitively, this changes how the text is apprehended; the typographical choice blurs the generic and formal boundaries, altering the rhythm of reading and influencing the narrative's progression.

Finally, the collection includes pages of continuous prose. They appear in full pages and are distinguished by very narrow margins, signaling their difference from the other texts. Regarding those *poèmes de prose*, Venaille insists that “it is not a prose without a skeleton, but a text with a structure that fully asserts its right to exist among other poems” (Venaille 2010, p. 114). First, we observe that these texts are calibrated; they do not exceed 1.5 pages. They are distinct from a short story or fable, such as those found in Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose*, which do not adhere to a specific length. Venaille's texts unfold according to a formal constraint, just like the others in the book.

The *poèmes de prose* are often centered around a theme, repeated throughout the text and ending with a closing effect, as the opening phrase becomes the conclusion (here we see the expression “Solitude à présent”). The unique aspect of these prose pages lies in their presentation of a narrative where moments of introspection—where the walker questions their inner journey—are mixed with observations of the surrounding reality. The strong lyrical drive accompanying the story is thus broken up by nearly objective notes that focus on details. These two elements coexist within a stylistically refined prose style. The mix of very short sentences and longer ones with parentheticals (marked by em dashes) greatly influences the rhythm of the prose. The many exclamatory sentences also show how the narrative's lyricism sometimes bursts through after moments of restraint. Ultimately, this style makes the work on enunciation particularly effective. Demonstrating this, the text shifts from the “I” (je) to a more impersonal “one” (on). The frequent use of this pronoun in the excerpt highlights its adaptable nature; sometimes it distances the subject's actions by avoiding first-person statements, and other times it refers to different individuals—such as in mentions of a café where people “do not say anything to each other”.

Solitude à présent. Tombée sur moi comme une brique. Tout ce que je fais—tout ce que je dis—chacune de mes pensées la met en évidence. Solitude à présent. Solitude au sein de quelques hommes retrouvés dans les cafés. Pour la combattre je conseille la lecture attentive du code fluvial ce qui permet, dans le meilleurs des cas, de pouvoir librement s'adresser aux péniches. Langage des câbles. Des routes à suivre. [...] Solitude à présent. Je ne saurais évoquer la largeur du fleuve, ses courbes lentes et ce qui—littéralement—me brûlait les yeux : ces champs d'un vert incandescent qui se resserrent sur les berges. Ô Solitude ! On traverse ce qui peut apparaître comme un en-

trepôt abandonné. Anxiété ! Qui saura dire ce qu'il en fut, autrefois, de cette bâtisse : hôpital ! hospice ! asile même ! On le traverse. On crierait bien, si l'on osait ! [...] Solitude. Ça ! [...] A présent : silence et solitude. Gens pauvres en paroles aussi. On communique pourtant. On pose son visage contre la vitre de la fenêtre et l'on regarde l'eau se déverser sur les toits. Pluie. Sur un sentier de terre noire. Ultimes bruits : sirènes—chocs de métaux—et concassage. On ne se dit rien. On était là avant ceux des autres villages. regarde devant soi : on voit le fleuve. On se retourne : il est là également.

(Venaille 1995, p. 41)

Solitude now. It hit me like a brick. Everything I do—everything I say—every one of my thoughts reveals it. Solitude now. Solitude among a few men found in cafés. To fight it, I suggest the careful reading of the river code, which, in the best cases, grants the freedom to speak to barges. The language of cables. The routes to follow. [...] Solitude now. I cannot describe the width of the river, its slow curves, and what—literally—burned my eyes: those fields of glowing green closing in on the banks. Oh, Solitude! One crosses what might seem like an abandoned warehouse. Anxiety! Who can say what this building once was: hospital! hospice! even asylum! One passes through it. One would cry out if one dared! [...] Solitude. That! [...] Now: silence and solitude. People also poor in words. Yet we communicate. One presses one's face against the windowpane and watches the water pour over the roofs. Rain. On a path of black earth. Final sounds: sirens—the clash of metal—and crushing. Nothing is said. We were here before people from other villages. One looks ahead: the river is there. One turns back: it's there too.

(Venaille 1995, p. 41)

5 Conclusion

We have observed how deeply narration permeates this formally intricate and rich work. It is initially approached from a general perspective, through inter-textual references to earlier works and an older epic tradition—specifically, a poem centered on the descent of a river. Furthermore, narration coexists with an often lyrical tone; the rhythms and intonations it adopts are highly diverse, for two reasons that we have examined. The typographical experiments, which blend prose and verse to create varied narrative dynamics, and especially, the constantly evolving modulation of enunciative devices. The manipulation of forms in *La Descente de l'Escaut* is, therefore, the opposite of a formalistic approach; formal variations support the multiple ways the story of a journey is narrated, rather than simply following a combinatorial pattern or constraints. While the river's course remains the same, the places, sensations, and emotions experienced by the traveler constantly shift. Ultimately, Venaille's work's uniqueness lies in his ability to unfold the narrative through both verse and prose, demonstrating that the boundaries between these two forms become increasingly blurred when combined within a single, unified poem.

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