Metaliterature in the Work of Russell Edson

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This paper examines Russell Edson's metaliterary texts. Since almost no previous attempts have been made to consistently systematize them, a diachronic approach has been adopted. Edson's collections, leaving aside his two novels and four short plays, are taken as the corpus for this work. Accordingly, his surrealist *ars poetica* is also analyzed in the light of his own dreamlike short texts, whether prose poems or short-short stories. It is concluded that the American writer constructed his apparently nonsensical works on the basis of a highly sophisticated rationalism insomuch as they refer to their own processes of composition while still preserving most of their surrealist features.

Keywords: metafiction; prose poetry; short-short story; surrealism; dreams

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Metaliteratura en la obra de Russell Edson

El objetivo de este artículo es examinar los textos metaliterarios de Russell Edson. Al no haberse realizado hasta la fecha casi ningún intento de sistematización consistente, se sigue un enfoque diacrónico. Se toman como corpus las colecciones de Edson, exceptuando sus dos novelas y cuatro piezas teatrales breves. En consonancia, se analiza también su *ars poetica* surrealista a la luz de sus propios textos cortos de carácter onírico, ya sean poemas en prosa o microrrelatos. Se concluye que el artista estadounidense construyó sus textos aparentemente absurdos desde un racionalismo muy sofisticado, en la medida en que se refieren a sus propios procesos de composición incluso al tiempo que conservan la mayoría de sus rasgos surrealistas.

Palabras clave: metaficción; poesía en prosa; microrrelato; surrealismo; sueños

1. Introduction

Like many other aspects of his oeuvre, Russell Edson's specific use of metaliterature has received very little attention. Although pertinent, the observations that have been made on this topic to date have been sporadic and, on the whole, insufficient—many of his metatexts still not yet having been studied, thus remaining 'castaways,' like the rest of his work. The aim of this paper is to fill this void by systematizing the majority of these short texts in connection with the author's *ars poetica*, which is also examined. It may be reasonably argued that Edson wrote both prose poems and short-short stories, which mainly—although not exclusively—differ from one another in terms of narrative drive and temporality.[1] Ultimately, this research seeks to delve into his oeuvre and thereby reinforce the few existing studies. At the same time, some additional light is shed on Edson's surrealist creative process in his short fiction—be it prose poetry or short-short stories. Rather than being an exception, the author uses the surrealist tone of most of his texts as a metaliterary resource, as explored below.

Scholars that have discussed metaliterature in the case of Edson include Lee Upton (1998, 60, 71), who refers to the author's "Poem of Intention" and "Toward the Writing"; Michel Delville (1998, 123–24), who briefly mentions some metafictional qualities in Edson's work in his text "The Matter"; and, more recently, B.K. Fischer (2015, 26–30) and Jon Loomis (2015, 31–34), who both comment on two markedly metaliterary texts by the writer. The approach to metaliterature in Edson's collections taken in this article is diachronic, so a chronological sequence is followed as much as possible. Diachrony can allow us to observe, at least to a certain extent, how Edson managed the use of metaliterature at different points in his literary career. The vast majority of publications on the author's work precede his death in 2014. Only a symposium, collected in the journal *FIELD* and edited by David Young and David Walker (2015), has, since then, been devoted exclusively to this subject. It is only now that Russell Edson's work can—and should—be fully covered. This article is conceived as a contribution to this.

2. Russell Edson in the Literary Scene

Categorizing Russell Edson (1935–2014) within a specific literary tradition is not a straightforward matter. This is not surprising, as he arguably remains outside the American literary canon despite his considerable influence on both readers and writers. A recluse for most of his life, Edson attended the Art Students League of New York as a teenager, but he was never very comfortable with academic labels and the literary ambiance. Nonetheless, the origins of his work can be traced back to the Deep Image poets and the New York poets, although not exclusively.

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[1]   Whereas the prose poem creates a static image in which there is very little or no temporal progression at all, the short-short story narrates one or more events that unfold with the temporality of fiction.

Deep Image poetry, in any of its three variants (Mambrol 2020), was characterized by what Dennis Haskell referred to as a "rational manipulation of irrational materials" (1979, 142). This planned creation of a contrived artifact has some connection with the compositional process followed by Edson, who affirmed: "My pieces, when they work, though full of odd happenings, win the argument against disorder through the logic of language and a compositional wholeness. So my ideal prose poem is a small, complete work, utterly logical within its own madness" (1999, n.p.). In other words, he acted as an editor of what he termed the "creative rush," which is consciously grasped in order to give shape to the text as a final product. Similar to Deep Image poet Robert Bly, Edson also thought of the image as a physical entity that the creative writer could exploit: "Dreams, no matter how absurd or strange, are believable because they make physical sense. It's the same creative process as found in poems" (1999, n.p.). Yet, unlike Bly, who rebelled against established political ideas through his poetry, Edson disliked messages and satire. It is therefore more accidental than intentional that, as Upton pointed out, "Edson's prose poems are profoundly political" (1998, 57). Even when they are, however, Edson's overall approach is much closer to art for art's sake.

Russell Edson's work likewise bears certain similarities to the New York School poets—active in the 1950s and 60s—who were powerfully influenced by surrealism and the visual arts, and who may have in turn influenced Edson, even though he did not explicitly acknowledge their impact. Instead, he said: "I suppose my strongest influence was Russell Edson. Although I never quite understood what he was doing, he was doing something that inspired me to feel it was possible to make things out of almost nothing at all" (1999, n.p.). All the same, the artistic tendencies of the time may have served as a seedbed which enabled Edson to subsequently find his own creative way. After all, he also attended Black Mountain College in North Carolina, an arts institution where he published his earliest collection, *Ceremonies in Bachelor Space* (1951).

Frank O'Hara, in his famous poem "Why Am I Not a Painter," wrote: "It is even in / prose, I am a real poet" (2003, n.p.). This statement suggests that the real poet is able to encapsulate poetry in prose, and thus it evokes Edson's craftmanship—it is little wonder that the latter has been generally venerated as "the Godfather of the prose poem in America." What is more, remarkably, O'Hara's text begins by stating an unfulfilled desire to paint:

> I am not a painter, I am a poet.
> Why? I think I would rather be
> A painter, but I am not.

Russell Edson was the son of the famous cartoonist Gus Edson and an illustrator himself, so it comes as no surprise that painting and writing are in some way combined in his *ars poetica*. He conceived poetry as the verbal expression of a non-verbal reality: "Trying to put a dream into words is like trying to translate a painting into words.

This is the difficulty with poetry. The poet has to create into language something that has no language" (1999, n.p.). To overcome this creative challenge, Edson consciously attempted to edit dreamlike elements.

This tension between the conscious and the unconscious can in fact be perceived in some of Edson's metaliterary texts selected for this article. Whereas the main aim of this paper is to establish a complete and consistent chronology of the author's metaliterature, comments on compositional aspects will also be included, where appropriate, when analyzing his texts.

3. The Intricacies of Metaliterature

If the ideas *literature* and *fiction* are often problematic, so too might be *metaliterature* and *metafiction*. Metafiction dates back to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605)—an achievement that is not always acknowledged. However, it is not until the second half of the twentieth century that, through analogy with Hjelmslev's concept of *metalanguage*, other related terms started to be used for similar formal designations: *metaliterature*, *metafiction*, *metatheater*, *metapoetry* and *metacinema*. One of the most influential theoretical works on the topic is Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), where the author underlines the proliferation of metafiction during the contemporary period and defines it as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2001, 2). With the caveat that fiction is, in truth, a part of reality (Maestro 2017, 852), Waugh's definition accurately encapsulates the essence of metafiction: self-referential fiction.

Even so, the metafictional process of self-reference is not direct. Unlike an emotion, which invariably occurs within the material essence of a specific sentient being and refers to no other entity than the one experiencing it, a metatext is self-referential only insomuch as an author has previously produced it in a deliberate manner: signifiers are handled in such a way that their respective signifieds create the effect of self-reference. *Sensu stricto*, it is only the result—the text—that is self-referential, for in the process there is a semantic network of referentialities that makes the final product self-referential. The metafictional effect is, therefore, more nominal than factual, since self-referentiality is but the result of what are often multiple intertwined references. Thus, a so-called metafictional work that is used to reflect upon fiction, in terms of either content or creative technique, does so only in a mediated way. This is achieved by means of normal linguistic references—not self-references—that in the end only produce a sensation of self-reference.

Metafiction is a more general term than *metaliterature*, which may indeed be encompassed within the former as a hyponym. As such, Edson's texts quoted below can be mainly labeled *metaliterary*. However, in this regard, it is also necessary to provide a

few clarifications about the American author's peculiar conception of literature. In his "Portrait of the Writer as a Fat Man," he famously claimed that "if the finished prose poem is considered a piece of literature, this is quite incidental to the writing" (Edson 1975, 103). Despite the fact that he was referring to prose poetry in particular here, he did write a large number of short-short stories as well. At the time of the quote, Edson was arguably trying to find his way into literature—even though he lacked faith in it—and the considerations expressed in his essay are consequently more literary than theoretical. He did not seek the truth, but rather his own particular truth—that is, a personal non-scientific psychologism. The subtitle of the essay is itself evidence of this: "Some *Subjective Ideas* or Notions on the Care and Feeding of Prose Poems" (Edson 1975, 95; italics added). "Portrait of the Writer as a Fat Man" must be read not as a rigorous theoretical work, but as one which is non-objective; after all, some passages are indeed literary. Russell Edson's work—metatexts included—has therefore to be studied employing reliable external philological criteria, not on its own basis. Even if he did not write with the consciousness of a literary author, his work must definitely be categorized as literature. As Eduardo Pellejero recently stated, "all writers are looking for something, even though they may not always know what that something is" (2020, 180).

4. Metaliterature in Russell Edson's Work

Edson's early collections do not contain many strictly metaliterary texts. The first book published by the author was *Ceremonies in Bachelor Space* (1951), which he wrote when he was a teenager and was republished by Tough Poets Press in 2020.[2] It is, however, *The Very Thing That Happens* (1964) which is generally regarded as the author's first main collection. This book showcases his distinctive unsettling fictions, characterized by Denise Levertov in the book's introduction as "the unique outgrowth of an eccentric imagination, the convoluted shell of the mind's hypersensitive, clairvoyant snail" (1964, 6). Edson's most common themes are already well known: the twisting of expectable reality, the macabre and the sexual, the personification of animals and objects, and the objectification of family members being the principal ones. For this reason, in the following pages we will be focusing directly on how these elements are metafictionalized by the author in connection with his own philosophy of composition. As indicated above, metaliterary features can be identified only very occasionally in this first major collection. The short-short story "A Man Who Writes" (Edson 1964, 57) does, however, provide a good representative example of these specific nuances.

His second major book, *What a Man Can See* (1969), includes almost no metatexts either. All the same, this is probably Edson's most singular work. In it, he often plays

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² Naturally, this work is not of great quality, and it is in no way representative of the author's talent. However, it is important to note how some of his creative predilections were, arguably, already present, albeit in a very primitive way.

with language as an end to itself, eliminating the relationship between signifiers and coherent semantic meaning to his greatest possible extent. The following excerpt from one of the texts in the collection, "Dream Man," perfectly epitomizes this technique: "If somebody who loves you does not love and there is very nothing to do like you will wind on Wednesday or apple as a cherry is as is an apple as a cherry" (Edson 1969, n. p.). When asked by Peter Johnson about this experimental style, Edson answered: "*What a Man Can See* is not an anomaly. Other people write anomalies. I always write what needs to be written at the time of its writing. The main thing is the creative lust, the immediate need to make something. Theory then comes too late. In this sense the completed work becomes the theory of itself" (1999, n. p.; italics in the original). This assertion encapsulates the author's previously mentioned conception of literature as an incidental result of the creative act itself. However, contradicting Edson's own psychologism, the truth is that his argument is invalid from a logical point of view: theory is the conceptualization of a reality—his text—from which the former is inductively inferred. In other words, this excerpt from *What a Man Can See* can be taken as a sample to elaborate or corroborate a general theory, but it can by no means be taken as theory *per se*. Albeit in a more subtle fashion, exactly the same thing applies to metaliterary texts: they are still literature—fiction—and, therefore, not theory. Nevertheless, it is no less true that a literary text can only be explained on its own, in such a way that any attempt to explain it with further words—those of theory—will be unsuccessful, asymptotic (Trujillo 1999, 281). This is probably what Edson intended to state, even though the word *theory* may not have been the best choice in this case, since literary theory is a field of study which deals with literature but which is not literature in itself—as Edson's quotation might mislead the reader into believing.

It is in *The Childhood of an Equestrian* (1973a) where what are arguably Edson's first two metatexts are found: "Toward the Writing" (92) and "I Am Writing Today Only to Prove That I Can Write" (54). The former has already been commented on by Upton, who states that, in it, Edson "ruthlessly criticizes the self-important poet, lampooning the conventional view of the poet as inspired by a vision of death. In this prose poem the narrator advises would-be writers to acquire a mouse dead of disease as inspiration" (1998, 71). As undesirable to Edson as this comment may be, his text indeed constitutes a reflection on the act of writing. In particular, he introduces a fictional literary element—the mouse—which functions as a vector for conveying a specific vision of the composition process.

No less meaningful is the second metatext, which begins as follows: "A man disguised as a bird dipped his false beak into a bottle of ink and wrote: My race has no hands because we decided to fly. Thus I am obliged to use my beak as a pen" (Edson 1973a, 54). Here the author blurs the boundary between humans and animals by representing a man who behaves as though he were a bird. As the work unfolds, Edson cunningly manages to create the false impression that the actant is, rather, a bird with human attributes such as speaking and writing. This (pseudo)prosopopoeia can certainly lead

us to a metaliterary conclusion: writers are deceivers who construct fiction within the limits of reality, yet often express imaginary possibilities that go beyond operational reality itself. By doing so, they are capable of representing emotions and thoughts other than their own. Gilles Deleuze claimed that "[w]riting is inseparable from becoming: in writing, one becomes-woman, becomes-animal or-vegetable, becomes-molecule, to the point of becoming-imperceptible" (1997, 225). This postmodernist reasoning is idealistic, however, since no male author becomes a woman when writing or vice versa, nor do they become plants or aliens. The biological features of a given being can only be modified by operating on its physical body itself. Reading and writing may obviously trigger a range of feelings, but this by no means implies a change in the actual properties of the human body, as suggested by the American writer and the French philosopher. The difference between Edson's creative approach and Deleuze's statement is that the former is operating within literature—fiction—and thus, has no commitment at all to either truth or falsehood. Artists are free to deceive in their fictional creations, and it is critics and theorists who must neutralize the effect by studying them. On the other hand, Deleuze's assertion falls under philosophy or even literary theory, and it must accordingly be truthful; otherwise, what is written is neither fiction nor rigorous philosophy nor literary theory.

In *The Clam Theater* (1973b), Edson began using a resource that would later become quite common in his texts: the *mise en abyme*, or *matryoshka* effect—fiction within fiction. One characteristic example is the last text included in the book, "When Science Is in the Country," (80) in which a scientist seems to be using a magnifying glass to observe a neighborhood where a farmer is in turn dreaming about harvesting the universe. More importantly, in this collection there are several metatexts worth mentioning, to which very little attention has to date been paid, namely the eponymous "The Clam Theater" (28) and "The Technical Limitation" (74). The latter's title is eloquent in itself and is most likely related to the famous sentence used by the author a few years later in his "Portrait of the Writer as a Fat Man," in a quasi-literary attempt to define the prose poem: "a prose that is a cast-aeroplane that can actually fly" (Edson 1975, 98).[3] Russell Edson had, thus, already employed this metaphor in his text "The Technical Limitation," which begins: "Some ants having found a fallen sparrow enter the anus with a view to revamping this aeroplane to airline service between distances not yet fully understood" (1973b, 74). Once again, as in the two texts from *The Childhood of an Equestrian*, he uses an animal—a sparrow in this case—as a vector to reflect on poetry, which he explicitly mentions a few lines later in a possibly rhetorical question: "Does poetry serve the shiny helmeted wits?" After introducing an ant hill as a new element, Edson provides the answer by means of a now definitely rhetorical question: "Of course it's back to the ant hill. Did you think there was enough brain in an ant's head to make

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[3] Johnson adopted this same phrase for his prose poetry anthology, *A Cast-Iron Aeroplane That Can Actually Fly* (2019).

this aeroplane fly?" (1973b, 74). The content of this prose poem—as it is more prose poem than short-short story—must necessarily be decoded as an allegory; otherwise, the author's metapoetic pun falls on deaf ears.

Motivated by the pertinent comparison he had established between the stories of Edson and those of Bertolt Brecht and Franz Kafka, Delville asserted that "Edson's prose poems are indeed utterly deprived of any allegorical content and often tend to refer to nothing outside their own logic-of-the-absurd conventions" (1998, 119). This, though, is not always true, as shown above. In his interview with Mark Tursi, Russell Edson himself even answered: "I'm very moved that my work has meant so much to you, but the truth is that my work doesn't lead anyplace, and proves a bad influence, even to me, the writer who writes it" (2004, n.p.). Nevertheless, this assertion should be taken as a mere act of modesty on the part of the author, whose viewpoint is again that of an artist and not of a theorist. Upton demonstrated, on the basis of his texts, that "Edson's prose poems are profoundly political" (1998, 57). In the light of this study, it must be added that some of them are also eminently metafictional, even when they refer to another fiction—the metaphor of the aeroplane as a non-theoretical attempt to define the prose poem. Edson's fictions are often multilayered. Narayana Chandran, who examined the writer's text "Piano Lessons" (1973a, 78), has highlighted the fact that "Edson tells a story directly. But […] we are not too sure that this is not quite a parable; it might well be a short commentary on the motives and methods of story-telling" (2013, 11). Chandran's approach is less bold than Upton's, since he does not make an explicit reference to prose poetry or to its political connotations. Because of this, it is also more vague, as he simply categorizes Edson's text as a "short commentary."

"The Clam Theater" is a prose poem that operates as a framework to evoke the author's dreamlike poetics itself. It begins: "They had started a hat factory . . . Basically in a dream . . . Entirely so when you think that the very foundation begins somewhere in the brain, when the brain is unlaced like a shoe, and like a shoe free of the conscious foot with its corns and calls" (Edson 1973b, 28). Ellipses included, this short paragraph condenses, in a metaliterary fashion, the tone of most of the writer's creations: a bewildering fiction behind which lies a tension between the author's consciousness and the supposed unconsciousness recreated in the text. In a subsequent line of the poem, Edson writes: "This is my theater. I sit in my head asleep. Theater in a clam . . ." (28). With this last phrase, *theater in a clam*, the author metaphorizes his texts as final products: a container—*clam*—of oneiric events taking place in his own "theater." The effect is (pseudo)metaoneiric, since Edson recreates dreams to connote recreated dreams—his fictions. Similarly, the second sentence of the quotation, *I sit in my head asleep*, refers to the state of dreaming awake, which the writer himself explicitly discussed in his interview with Johnson: "my best pieces seem written by someone, or something, else. I don't mean 'automatic writing,' or 'stream-of-consciousness,' exactly. But writing in such a way that one dreams while being fully awake" (Edson 1999, n.p.). Given the importance of these words

to understanding Edson's creative process, deeper insight is provided on this issue throughout the analysis of the selected texts that follows.

In *The Intuitive Journey* (1976), which also includes Edson's pieces from *The Childhood of an Equestrian*, there is one main work that is worth considering in terms of metaliterature: "Poem of Intention." Both the title and the fact that the author dedicated it to Robert Bly, Robert Coover, Donald Hall and Charles Simic already give an indication of his purpose: to share and disseminate his *ars poetica*. The text is reproduced in its entirety below:

> An outward looking work of whales and elephants and, of course, apes; some musical instruments, particularly the piano, believing it to have some familial relationship to gross legged animals; also some biological machinery, aeroplanes able to reproduce sexually, and to suckle their young with gasoline udders . . .
> These things, and more, live already in the idea that I have of my typewriter, like dreams waiting only to be dreamed.
> One has only to see the typewriter as the console of a kind of dream organ which, when played toward ecstasy, must bring its pipes, the chimneys and trees and telephone poles of the near neighborhood, to howling and shrieking! (Edson 1976, 90)

There are two main aspects to highlight in this prose poem—not a short-short story, as narrative and temporal impetus are almost nonexistent. The first paragraph operates as an inventory of some of the author's most common actants, namely animals and objects invested with extrinsic irrational features. For instance, the figure of the aeroplane appears again, now empowered by one of Edson's favorite literary motifs: sexuality. Also in *The Intuitive Journey,* we find the remarkable "The Traveler" (85), in which the resource of the *mise en abyme* mentioned earlier is again employed: a man enters a woman and, inside, a car drives him to an airport and he "is put aboard a spaceship." In the last paragraph, he inserts a sexual element which creates another metaliterary effect: "Never mind if the spaceship is phallic, and that it thrusts into the dark vagina of space; he is, after all, only a traveler, not a symbolist" (85). With this sentence, Edson indirectly admits to using human references such as "phallic" or "vagina" as metaphors for a non-human reality: outer space. It is, however, the indisputable fact that beings live in and can operate on reality that allows humans to measure even space with their own referential system, which in this case fulfills a (meta)poetic function in the text.

Secondly, the last two paragraphs in "Poem of Intention" are a declaration of the author's composition process. As noted above, Edson presents an aporetic state of dreaming awake as synonymous with the creative impulse. Concurrently, however, he recognizes that it is not automatic writing or stream of consciousness. Upton observed that "despite his focus on dreams, Edson's is not a purely surreal prose poetry" (1998, 60). This is perhaps the main point of contention: what *pure surrealism* is. Edson's style has indeed been compared with the surrealist techniques of authors such as Paul

Éluard and André Breton. Even Federico García Lorca's most surrealist work—namely
Poeta en Nueva York (1940)—can be taken as a reference for comparison. In this vein,
Donald Hardy argued that "Edson, like the European surrealists, seeks to destroy the
societally controlled stability of language, but he does not achieve this directly through
automatic writing. Even though Edson has said that the writing of the prose poem
'needs to be done as rapidly as possible,' […] one will hardly ever find in Edson's work
the automatic nonsense of a prose poem like Breton's 'Women on the Beach'" (1988,
95). A few lines later, Hardy adds that "[a]utomatic writing militates against this
sense of coherence in poetry" (1988, 96). He specifically refers to "the sense of a plot,
of a narrative with consistent characters, setting, and reference" (1988, 96), which
characterizes a part of Russell Edson's writing. The truth is that Edson himself did
likewise destabilize the semantic coherence of language in *What a Man Can See* (1969),
without really making use of automatic writing.

The *Reason Why the Closet-Man Is Never Sad* (1977a) may be viewed as a transitional
work in terms of Edson's management of metaliterature. In this collection, texts with
a *matryoshka* effect abound: "The Fight in the Meadow" (27) and "A Night at the
Theater" (48), which unfold as though the fictions were taking place in a theater; and
"Making a Movie" (44), a parody of cinema and one of Edson's potpourri-like short-
short stories that mixes humans, animals and even cinematographic archetypes such
as the hero and the heroine. Even the eponymous "The Reason Why the Closet-Man
Is Never Sad" (62), one of the author's most puzzling creations, can be interpreted as
another text referring to its own apparently meaningless meaning. In a similar vein,
"The Lonely Traveler" (43) is a masterful very short narration that depicts the journey
of a lonely traveler on a road, which reaches its end at the same time as the text is also
concluded by the author.

All the same, it is *The Wounded Breakfast* (1985) that perhaps marks the before and
after in Edson's metaliterature, for in this work he no longer even veils it in metaphors.
One of the collection's most meaningful texts in this regard, "The Matter" (15), was
noted by Delville, who stated that it "summarizes Edson's poetics of fabulation" and
cleverly pointed out that "the 'story' gradually turns into a snake eating its own tail"
(1998, 123). The text, much closer to prose poetry than to short-short storytelling
in this case, indeed consists of what Edson in the last line, alluding to the work as a
whole, says is "only an arrangement of words" which, in the end, shape the poem. An
interesting comparison can be drawn between Edson's "The Matter" and Lope de Vega's
famous "Soneto de repente," a sonnet composed entirely of references to the formal
structure of the sonnet itself:

> Un soneto me manda hacer Violante,
> Que en mi vida me he visto en tanto aprieto;
> Catorce versos dicen que es soneto:
> Burla burlando van los tres delante.

Yo pensé que no hallara consonante
Y estoy a la mitad de otro cuarteto,
Mas si me veo en el primer terceto,
No hay cosa en los cuartetos que me espante.
Por el primer terceto voy entrando,
Y parece que entré con pie derecho,
Pues fin con este verso le voy dando.
Ya estoy en el segundo, y aun sospecho
Que voy los trece versos acabando;
Contad si son catorce, y está hecho (Vega Carpio 1982, 266).

In this sonnet, Lope de Vega builds the stanzas in such a way that they refer to their specific process of composition—four lines for the quatrains and three lines for the tercets. He fulfills the formal requisites of a Spanish sonnet by describing, in a poetic yet truthful way, the exact point of the compositional process that he is at in each case: "y estoy a la mitad de otro cuarteto," "Por el primer terceto voy entrando" and "que voy los trece versos acabando." His sonnet is thus devoid of ideas other than the creative method itself, which makes it an instructional literary piece. While separated in time by four centuries, Lope de Vega's and Edson's respective poems are very similar with respect to the creative enterprise. However, whereas Lope de Vega's text refers to the fixed structure of a Spanish sonnet—fourteen lines arranged in two quatrains and two tercets—Edson's poem suggests the less formally defined configuration of a prose poem, which in the end becomes a structure in itself. The fact that narration is kept to a minimum makes "The Matter" a prose poem, albeit one where temporal flow is suspended in a kind of isolated static description.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that Edson always wrote with a plan in mind. In the Tursi interview, he states: "I just make up things as I go along without a program. It's more fun that way" (Edson 2004, n.p.). On many occasions, Edson certainly improvised his short texts as he was composing them. One of the best examples, "The Tunnel", is in fact found in *The Wounded Breakfast* (66). This text is especially well known for also being the eponymous title of the author's most widely read anthology, *The Tunnel* (1994), in which he included his own favorite pieces from previous works. "The Tunnel" begins with the speaker "tunneling into the earth" (1994: 228). Even though the story seems to have no clear meaning, words follow on from one another in the text as if there really were a specific quest in the mind of the character. Consider the fact that according to Jorge Luis Borges, "the pursuit" is the third of the four most recurring literary stories, the others being a besieged city, the return, and the sacrifice of a god (1989, 506). In the case of "The Tunnel," the theme of the pursuit is but a pretext for the author to write without any particular forethought. In his anthology *A Cast-Iron Aeroplane That Can Actually Fly* (2019), Peter Johnson included a very revealing commentary on this text by Edson himself: "One assumes meaning even if

one is looking the other way as the work unfolds. Language is meaning without one's having to dig a tunnel for it. I had no idea what the speaker would do with his first line. But as the piece continued it seemed to be making fairly good sense, even if its speaker, claiming to be tunneling into darkness expecting light, didn't" (2019, 66-67). The fact that not even the author had a straightforward meaning in mind fosters the idea of the "intentional fallacy" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946); namely, depending on the reader's interpretation, the pursuit in "The Tunnel" could serve as various metaphors, including for the creative process itself—metaliterature.

As far as metaliterature is concerned, there is an even more relevant text in *The Wounded Breakfast*: "Edson's Mentality" (52). Clearly a short-short story, it was first included in the eponymous *Edson's Mentality* (1977b, 8–9), one of the author's small collections. In the later version of the text, there are some changes in punctuation—dashes are often replaced by semicolons—and the phrasing of direct speech. Since many of his works previously appeared in literary magazines or in small collections, it should come as no surprise that certain elements were altered in some way when they were compiled in the larger books. While this might have simply been a decision of the editor, the fact that there are a significant number of Edson's texts in other collections with similar modifications suggests the contrary. This uncertainty is a corollary of the lack of ecdotic analysis of Edson's oeuvre, which should definitely be carried out in a separate study. Given that the author himself emphasized writing as a process rather than as a result, it is of note that he still—in the event it was him—revised his own published texts presumably to perfect them in subsequent publications. His unassertively expressed desire to standardize the prose poem as a "personal form disciplined not by other literature but by unhappiness" (Edson 1975, 100–01) could possibly serve as an explanation.

Textual issues aside, "Edson's Mentality" constitutes a unique instance in the artist's work, for it is most likely the only text where he explicitly included himself as part of the fiction, thus demonstrating the metaliterary effect. The following long excerpt from this short-short story is indicative of both Edson's declared self-awareness as a writer and of how he builds the metalepsis in a comical way through dialogue. Prior to the excerpt below, the doctor had successfully induced an erection with ejaculation in a dead corpse by means of electrical treatments.

> [...] A nurse wipes his forehead and says, doctor, you're such a nice man, don't feel bad, yours are the sorrows of Dr. Frankenstein.
> But, nurse, that's fiction.
> Like this.
> No no, this is real life, says the doctor.
> No, says the nurse, Russell Edson is writing this.
> No no, we are our own selves giving electrical treatments to the dead that they might live again! cries the doctor.

> But we don't even live, says the nurse, so how can we make the dead, who, in fact, are not
> really dead, live?
> Stop it, nurse, because you are ruining my life; won't feel like getting up in the morning
> anymore; nothing's real; drifting, I drift into fiction; from the window I see the trees
> of fiction, everything is turning to fiction; the *real* clouds are found to be only Edson's
> mentality . . .
> I end up at the funny farm, and am told that this is just one more of Edson's fictions—Lost,
> lost! I end up nutty as a fruitcake; maybe nuttier! (Edson 1985, 52; italics in the original)

Needless to say, the story is a parody of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), the
character also explicitly mentioned by the nurse. Parody is not uncommon in Russell
Edson's work, appearing as it does in other texts, such as "The Epic" (1973b, 39), "An
Historical Breakfast" (1977a, 35) and the already mentioned "Making a Movie" (1977a,
44). The intertextuality between "Edson's Mentality" and Mary Shelley's myth is no
less revealing of how Edson's oeuvre is, despite the author's claims, neither culturally
innocent nor isolated in literary historiography. The most meaningful aspect of this
passage by Edson is that it is not the reader who realizes there is a metaliterary effect,
but the actant himself—Dr. Frankenstein. In previous texts, such as "In the Forest," the
characters lacked any awareness of being themselves fiction: "I stood in the gloom and
silence that many forests have in the pages of fiction" (1976, 70). Although not without
being shocked, in "Edson's Mentality," the actant does gain awareness of his fictional
condition, thus disrupting the metaleptic naturalization that literature normally
entails. This technique is clearly not new, but it does represent a unique case in Edson's
work. No less significant is the fact that the author uses the word *fiction*, which he
understood as opposed to *poetry* (Edson 1999, n.p.), in a text that he would have most
likely later categorized as *prose poetry*. The reason for this inconsistency is probably as
simple as his self-confessed lack of "formal background" (Edson 2004, n.p.).

   The *Tormented Mirror* (2001) is a very prominent collection when it comes to
metaliterature, particularly in three texts: "On the Writing of a Prose Poem" (42),
"Poetry" (45) and "The Reality Argument: Some Brief Notes on How Things Come to
Exist, the Question of Random Selection and/or Purposeful Manufacture, with a View
Toward Finding the 'Theory of Everything'" (80-81). The latter has been analyzed in
depth by Fischer (2015, 26–30): it is a metatext, filled with toy and sexual elements, in
which the author suggests the postmodern idea that "[w]hat will be has already begun
to exist before it does, otherwise it should never exist at all . . ." (Edson 2001, 81).
In addition to Fischer's commentary, the content of the text—and of this sentence in
particular—can be explained by quoting an unpublished letter sent by Russell Edson
to Glenn Russell,[4] in which the former stated: "Having written so many of these short

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   [4] Glenn Russell is a literary critic and a prose poet himself. Mainly influenced by Russell Edson and Barry
Yourgrau, he has published several short text collections, such as *The Plantings* (1989) and *How Groundhogs Play
Croquet* (1994). The author of this article wishes to thank him for kindly sharing Edson's letter.

prose things, like the eggs of a woman, one has only so many. I believe the amount of short prose pieces one has within himself is genetically determined at conception. Once they're written out, there are no more" (Edson 1993). The author's mindset about his own short texts as numerically predefined writings correlates with the idea suggested in "The Reality Argument […]," whose long title is almost self-explanatory.

The other two metaliterary texts included in the collection are crucial to understanding Edson's *ars poetica*. Despite seemingly referring only to poetry, both of them can be extended to literature in general, as they are either focused on prose poetry—which was conceived by Edson and many of his contemporaries as a rather vague category—or connected more with mode than with form. In "On the Writing of a Prose Poem," the author inserts a dialogue between the creator and a divine entity—the "God of things" or "Highness" (2001, 42). This figure can be taken as equivalent to that of the muse traditionally thought to inspire poets. The whole text thus becomes a recreation of the metaphorical tension experienced by writers during the creative process. Additionally, this friction may also allegorize the relationship between the creator's conscious and his supposed unconscious. Like some of his contemporaries, such as Borges and James Tate, Russell Edson emphasized the idea of editing: "My job as a writer is mainly to edit the creative rush. […] [T]he gifted writer is the good editor" (Edson 2004, n. p.). A complementary viewpoint can be found in his other metatext, "Poetry":

> You will hear her, the muse; she knocks three times. Past that she knocks no more…
>
> The password is nonsense.
> This begins the secret which hides the final message.
>
> You will sit in the dark waiting for three knocks. Do not be fooled by the coming of three little pigs, or the old man who hobbles on a cane. The one who slays the Sphynx at the end of the game.
>
> The consummation is nonsense, without which the road of the final message is overgrown with meaning, and the vagueness of everything is everywhere… (Edson 2001, 45)

Edson encrypts his surrealist *ars poetica* by managing various elements. He had already used some of them, such as "the Sphinx," in previous texts. In "The Liver Gag," for instance, he wrote: "Now dwarves are at his door shouting for the answer to the riddle of the Sphinx" (1977a, 40). The Sphinx seems to symbolize a final end or achievement. The figure of "the muse," shrouded in the overall masked tutorial tone distilled in "Poetry," is again a personification of inspiration. What follows is essentially a call for a sophisticated surrealism: even if the "password [content] is nonsense," the subsequent creative instructions in the penultimate paragraph could only be followed in a conscious

manner: "sit in the dark waiting," "do not be fooled." The coincidences with one of Kafka's aphorisms are more than conspicuous at this point: "It is not necessary for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Do not even listen, only wait. Do not even wait. Stay completely still and alone. The world will offer itself to you for unmasking; it can't help it; it will writhe before you in ecstasy" (Kafka 2012, 200). Edson builds an apparently nonsensical fiction that, nonetheless, operates as metasurrealist. His texts are potential sophisms that gain meaning when interpreted on the basis of surrealism. In this regard, Tursi was very observant when he conceptualized Edson's work as a kind of "mockery" of García Lorca's idea of *duende*—i.e., the idealistic ineffable power that lies within humans and that leads them to artistic creation (Edson 2004, n.p.). Above all, it must be clear that Russell Edson was conscious of his final product through the editing process, even if the process seems to be unconscious. As Michael Rumaker put it: "If the unconscious has appeared in writing, it has been mainly by accident. Here is a rich field of content. To be acted consciously. To be made known" (1963, 340). These procedures and this reasoning can be applied to either prose poetry or short-short stories, since the form does not obliterate the mode or the tone. At most, it might be that prose poetry is closer to surrealism than poetry in verse (Lehman 2003, 20).

Russell Edson included metaliterary texts up to the last of his collections. *The Rooster's Wife* (2005), his penultimate book, is certainly rich in this regard, namely: "New Prose About an Old Poem" (48), which is a reflection on authors' doubts about publishing a poem or throwing it away; "Let Us Consider" (63), an inventory of Edson's disconcerting fictions that is somewhat similar to "Poem of Intention" (1976, 90), mentioned earlier; "The Organ of Thought" (64), a comic allusion to the brain as creative device, which was also present in his "Poem of Intention"; "The Truffle Garden" (67), which contains a metonymy of the head as the door to "the land of dreams"; and "Of Memory and Distance" (84), which also blurs the boundary between fiction and its encompassing reality. Likewise, in Edson's last book, *See Jack* (2009), there is one potential metatext that is worthy of mention: "The Indefinite Article" (30), in which he again plays with semantic indeterminacy by referring to indefinite articles that fall from the narrator's head. After all, Edson was partly ironic, partly truthful when arguing that he "value[d] the articles of speech as the most beautiful parts of the language" (1999, n.p.). Without a shadow of a doubt, a large number of Edson's texts gave more or less explicit indications of his own philosophy of composition.

5. Conclusions

In the light of this study, it is reasonable to assert that Edson's literary oeuvre frequently includes metafictional features. Specifically, the diachronic research undertaken demonstrates continuity in the author's usage of metaliterature from the 1970s to the end of his production in 2009. This resource usually goes hand in hand with (neo)surrealism, an artistic sophistication mastered by Edson under the guise of unconsciousness and

daydreaming. In some ways, this makes his work an "involuted nonsense" (Delville 1998, 112), which persists in his metatexts as they still draw attention to their processes of composition. This quality has recently been observed in surrealist prose poetry (Atherton and Hetherington 2017, n.p.), and Edson himself asserted that "the prose poem is a critique of the very act of writing" (1999, n.p.). All the same, metaliterary characteristics have also been found in many of his short-short stories, such as the eloquent "Edson's Mentality," in which there is a clear narrative and temporal progression.

Regardless of genre, this paper attempts to address the majority of Edson's short metatexts in chronological order. All his published books—excluding novels and short plays—have been examined as thoroughly as possible. Nevertheless, more metaliterary pieces could perhaps be found among his non-anthologized texts—such as the piece written for the epilogue of *The Best of the Prose Poem: An International Journal* (2000)— and even among the collections examined here. As a matter of fact, Russell Edson's metaliterature is much more expansive and revelatory than initially anticipated. Even though the author questioned theoretical analysis, it is through it that his work can and should be canonized. His posthumous recognition must be attained not by adulating him in an acritical way, but by undertaking a close reading of his entire oeuvre.

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