

Prose/Poetry¹

What is poetry and if you know what poetry is what is prose.

—Gertrude Stein

For years I wrote prose poems without knowing what I was doing, thinking instead that I was writing some sort of shrunken, deformed story that I was too lazy to transform into a piece of *real* fiction. At the time, “prose poem” to me meant some sort of Dada-esque stream-of-consciousness vignette—and I, on the other hand, was writing what I thought of simply as very short stories. This was long before the term *flash* had been applied to fiction in any but a marketing sense, and *short shorts* still referred to an item of clothing.

For a while I told anyone who would listen that I was writing, or attempting to write, “experimental fiction.” While it was true that these pieces, put together as a sequence, did hint at an underlying theme, a montage-like connection of some sort between the disparate sections, in a traditional sense they lacked pretty much all semblance of a plot. So it wasn’t long before I felt uncomfortable calling them fiction at all and began writing sentences which were broken up into lines—that is, *free verse*. But this wasn’t satisfying either. I kept feeling self-conscious, as though the words I was putting on the page were announcing themselves as POETRY—and I had to keep thinking of how and where to end the line, or of how it would seem if I didn’t end it but instead began to sound like Blake or Whitman or Ginsberg. No, that wasn’t what I wanted at all. I wanted to write *prose*, thank you very much.

One day, I decided to come out of the closet and to admit that, yes, I was writing

prose poems—but then to add, *sotto voce*: Though perhaps they’re not what you’ve come to think of as prose poems. I wasn’t sure at the time that many people in America had come to think much at all about the prose poem, but by God I knew what I thought of it. It gave me the freedom to play with a mix of characteristics of tone and style and subject matter that were traditionally the realm of fiction writers, along with other elements that were traditionally poetic. That was the key to me: to be able to draw on the resources available to both fiction writers and poets.

The impulse of prose, it seems to me, is to tell a story—a story grounded in the real world—and this is true whether we are reading a newspaper, a letter, a biography, or a novel. Prose can therefore speak of everyday experience in ways difficult if not impossible for free verse. This ability of the prose poem to take on various registers of language, its ability to masquerade as different sorts of literary or non-literary prose, is one of its distinguishing characteristics—what Marguerite Murphy calls (after Mikhail Bakhtin) its *heteroglossia*.² In this way, prose contains the language of the everyday—but a poem is something else again. When we break a paragraph up into lines, creating free verse, the text immediately does more than simply tell a story. The context has shifted. The poem takes on airs, it has pretensions. Prose says: “Come listen. I alone can tell this tale.” But a poem entices us: “Come listen. No one else can tell this tale as artfully as I.”

To get an idea of how this distinction actually works, it’s instructive to look at a piece of writing that has appeared in print as both poetry and prose. In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Poetry*, W. B. Yeats briefly discusses Walter Pater’s influence on the post-Victorian generation. Pater, as Yeats says, “was accustomed to give each sentence a separate page of manuscript, isolating and analyzing its rhythm”—and

therefore, “only by printing it in *vers libre* can one show its revolutionary importance.”³

This Yeats does, presenting a lineated version of a sentence in which Pater describes

Michaelangelo’s *Mona Lisa*:

First, here’s the original:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has molded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.⁴

And here is Yeats’ lineated version of this sentence:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits;
like the vampire,
she has been dead many times,
and learned the secrets of the grave;
and has been a diver in deep seas,
and keeps their fallen day about her;
and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;
and, as Leda,
was the mother of Helen of Troy,
and, as Saint Anne,
was the mother of Mary;
and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,
and lives
only in the delicacy
with which it has molded the changing lineaments,
and tinged the eyelids and the hands.⁵

Yeats has added one word, “was,” at the beginning of the eleventh line, presumably because the rhythm, as free verse, is slightly different in this case from the prose version. This rhythmic difference arises because the line ending causes a typical reader, on a subtle or not-so-subtle level, to slow the pace down and emphasize the individual words of the clause, requiring a second “was” to support the repetition. One

effect of the lineation, in other words, is to add another kind of punctuation. Denise Levertov, in speaking of this phenomenon, puts it more gracefully:

The most obvious function of the line-break is rhythmic: it can record the slight (but meaningful) hesitations between word and word that are characteristic of the mind's dance among perceptions but which are not noted by grammatical punctuation.⁶

In this way lineation leads to a different sort of stress pattern in free verse than in prose. As Alice Corbin Henderson stated in 1913, while assistant editor of Harriet Monroe's newly-fledged *Poetry* magazine, "The essential difference between prose and poetry is in the quality of the rhythmic phrase."⁷ This difference comes to the ear as a higher ratio of stressed to unstressed syllables in the lineated version of Pater's sentence than in the prose. Investigating just this difference in a dissertation study at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Prudence Byers examined how people read aloud different kinds of non-metrical texts. She measured, among other things, the number of stressed and unstressed syllables in each sample. As it turns out, the ratio of stressed to unstressed syllables in free verse is, not surprisingly, higher than in prose.⁸ Thus it's possible to say that one characteristic which distinguishes free verse rhythms from those of prose is an increased frequency of stress. The paragraph begins to sound incantatory, more like blank verse than like prose.

Besides sounding more traditionally "poetic," highly stressed language also sounds more British than American. As Mencken says in *The American Language*: "In general, the speech-tunes of the Englishman show wider melodic curves than those of the American, and also more rapid changes."⁹ In effect, this comes across as speech with a greater number of stressed syllables—again, more like blank verse than prose. If not iambic itself, free verse plays itself off against the deeply-felt iambic rhythm of blank

verse—the other unrhymed verse in English. Free verse is haunted thus by the ghost of blank verse, and its shackles are difficult to throw off.

Though it works for the British, it's hard to render the rhythms of American speech in an iambic line. "We do not speak English—remember that," said William Carlos Williams: "We speak our own language."¹⁰ And therefore we need a poetry of our own, one that contains the American voice as well as blank verse (together with its free verse variations) contains the English voice. What we have in the prose poem is a piece of writing grounded in the real world, whose rhythms and intonations embody not a traditional English prosody, but rather the speech patterns of everyday America. And therefore, in my opinion, the prose poem is a form particularly suited to American poetry.

Though many poems are fictional, this doesn't make them fiction in the sense that term is generally used. In the common understanding, a piece of fiction must have a plot, though in a one-page fiction the plot might be only implied or presumed. Plot in a "normal" piece of fiction—story, novel, film—involves the working-through of some sort of interpersonal tension over a span of time. In a short-short, the resolution can only be hinted at: the process caught in a single frame, contained in one precise moment.

On the one hand, a traditional narrative is built up by slow degrees, layer by layer of impressions like an Old Masters oil painting; on the other hand, flash fiction is like Zen calligraphy, all the creative energy stored like water behind a dam—or electricity in a Leiden jar—released in one burst of activity, lines on paper, the sense of the thing captured in just a few quick strokes. There are works of verse that operate this same way, but we conceive of them as poems rather than stories. Take, for example, Shakespeare's sonnets, which interweave the Narrator, his Beloved, and the mysterious Other Man. If

written in prose, these could make a flash sequence—each individual piece capturing a single emotional configuration—but they are sonnets, and we focus less on the implied or hidden “plot” and more on the writing itself, each piece shining with what Walter Pater, in another context, called a hard, gem-like flame.

A plot means simply that something *happens* within a story, while in a poem all we can say for sure is that something *is happening*. In fact this is only a question of emphasis. The novel, or story, concerns itself with what physicists call the *arrow of time*—or the arc which any particular arrow follows—while the poem, or lyric, concerns itself with what Buddhists might call the *suchness* of time, the way that things manifest in the moment. Often a piece of writing will do both, and it’s a toss-up as to which is predominant—but to the reader, emphasis can often be seen as essence, what the text in question is really “about.”

So what’s the difference between a prose poem and a short-short story? I think the question itself reveals a misapprehension. Like the legendary blind men examining an elephant, each one of us feels the particular part of the body he or she is holding, and no one agrees with the others as to what sort of creature it is that they’re touching. Like tribes with different sorts of kinship relations, we argue over what to call the child who’s the son or daughter of a mixed marriage. But it’s the same kid we’re talking about—and let’s not forget that. The very question presupposes a duality or opposition, a this-or-that relationship in which there exists a certain boundary between the two forms. But in fact many pieces of short prose can be conceived as falling into both categories, and in those cases, at least, this is a distinction without a difference. They are two sides of a single coin.

Each reader, I'm suggesting, is responsible for accounting for a particular piece of writing in his or her own way; the act of reading thus defines the text. In its essence the short prose piece, by whatever name, is a hybrid form, located at the crossroads of story and poem. On the one hand we can trace its lineage back through the universe of poetry—rhymed verse, blank verse, free verse—and on the other hand its background includes the whole world of prose—fiction, nonfiction, memos and letters home. Those who call what they write *flash fiction* see themselves as heirs of a whole tradition of storytellers, and those who write *prose poems* see themselves in a long line of poets. The reality, of course, is that poets are, many of them, storytellers—just as storytellers, many of them, are poets. Both schools have ended up being drawn to the same classroom, short prose, but each sees that *short* as a different sort of place.

The story, whatever name it takes, has as part of its charm that it's written in what we can call the language of the quotidian, language that purports to tell of the real world. Poetry, on the other hand, by its very nature exists beyond the realm of ordinary discourse—and this combination of opposites is what makes the prose poem so endlessly fascinating. While prose rises organically from the everyday, poetry with its long tradition of “nightingales and psalms” has about it something transcendent—something, we might say, of the sacred. In this way the prose poem, child of two worlds, serves to bring together, at long last, the sacred and mundane.

More than a hundred years ago, Walt Whitman wrote: “In my opinion the time has arrived to essentially break down the barriers of form between prose and poetry.” The muse of America, he concluded, “soars to the freer, vast, diviner heaven of prose.”¹¹

Notes

¹ These comments, somewhat modified, have been lifted from two places: my introduction to *The Party Train: A Collection of North American Prose Poetry* (Minneapolis: New Rivers Press, 1996), and my afterword to *Family Portrait: American Prose Poetry, 1900-1950* (Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, 2012).

² Margueritte S. Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery* (Amherst: U Mass, 1993), 90.

³ W. B. Yeats, Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), viii.

⁴ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London, Macmillan, 1888), 130.

⁵ Walter Pater, "Mona Lisa," *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935*, 1.

⁶ Denise Levertov, "On the Function of the Line" [1979], *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 79.

⁷ Alice Corbin Henderson, "Poetic Prose and Vers Libre," *Poetry* 2, no. 2 (May 1913): 70.

⁸ Prudence P. Byers, "The Contribution of Intonation to the Rhythm and Melody of Non-Metrical English Poetry" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 1977), 31; see also Tables 18 and 19, pp. 41-42.

⁹ H. E. Mencken, *The American Language*, Fourth Edition (New York: Knopf, 1936), 322.

¹⁰ William Carlos Williams, "Briarcliffe Junior College Talk," as quoted in Linda Welsheimer Wagner, *The Prose of William Carlos Williams* (Middletown: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1970), 8.

¹¹ Walt Whitman, "Notes Left Over," *Collected Prose*, pref. Malcolm Cowley, Vol. 2 of *Complete Poetry and Prose* (1892; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968), 332-333.