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SOME CRITICS AND THE VULGAR ERROR

Charles Allen Smith

Everyone who has ever been enchanted by the written word—and this surely includes everyone who has ever attempted to teach it—has given at least a passing thought to the question: Wherein lies the difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose?

Late in World War II a three-star general landed with his staff in a B-24 at one of our island bases on a two-day inspection tour. The base was being used as a depot where retired planes were disassembled and stored as replacement parts for planes still in service. Two days later the general came back from his tour, ready to fly back to Washington and turn in his report. But he found that there would be a delay. Temporarily, at least, he was grounded. In his absence his personal B-24 had been mistaken for a retiree and given the treatment. It was now stored all over the base in a thousand bins, all neatly numbered, labelled, and recorded in quadruplicate.

I've always liked this story. There is a small boy in most of us who enjoys seeing tacks placed on the seats of the mighty. I get a vicarious thrill out of imagining what the general said when he found his plane had been methodically dismantled. I churn with pity and fear, as Aristotle said tragedy should make me do, as I think of the base commander trying to explain to the general why they had taken his airplane apart.

But most of all I like the story because it points up our chronic compulsion—especially potent in the academic fraternity—to break things down and file them away in categories. We can't feel really comfortable and secure until everything is reduced to components and neatly labelled. Give us five minutes alone with the general's plane and we'll have it in bins.

For a long time critics have felt a need to set up hard and fast criteria for drawing a distinction between the language of poetry and the language of prose. There is a feeling that the more obvious distinctions between poetry and prose—the fact that poetry may be in rhyme and prose may not be, the fact that the rhythms of poetry are obvious enough to scan and those of prose are more sophisticated—are not enough. There must be a basic difference in their diction and their imagery. To speak of a "poetic phrase" or a "prosaic statement" must really mean something. There must be a bin labelled "Language of Poetry" and a bin labelled "Language of Prose."

Percy Bysshe Shelley has warned us against such word-sorting. In the *Defence of Poetry* he says, "The distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error." I cannot think of an easier way to remain ignorant of the nature of poetry than to refuse to read Shelley's *Defence*.

In another of the most significant critical documents in the language William Wordsworth agrees entirely with Shelley. In the "Preface" to the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth says:

. . . it would be a most easy task to prove . . . that not only the language of a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose, but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written . . . we will go further. It may be safely affirmed, that there neither is, nor can be, any *essential* difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. (7)

But in the wake of these knowledgeable testimonies the attempt to categorize language into what is suitable for poetry and what is suitable for prose goes solemnly on.

For instance, T. E. Hulme settles the matter with withering scorn. "Prose," he says, "is . . . the museum where the dead metaphors of the poets are preserved." (4) As I reflect upon this, a prose passage from Henry David Thoreau comes to mind:

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.

It seems to me that these metaphors are very lively "dead" in an uncommonly vital museum.

George Rylands decides that "Poetry should be simple, sensuous, and impassioned." (6) This would shut out the intricate sophistries of John Donne and the cold gemmology of Emily Dickinson. And, of course, it would shut out George Crabbe, who is as sensuous as a marble bust of Frances E. Willard.

Lascelles Abercrombie thinks that a sound theory of poetry is to be found in Shakespeare's description of the poet's eye "in a fine frenzy rolling." (1) But Joseph Addison wrote poetry and he never had a frenzied moment. (On his deathbed he called his nephew to witness

how an English gentleman should die.) Yet some of our prose-producing news commentators reside in perpetual tizzies.

The use of metaphor in prose, says J. G. Jennings, is “analytic and classifying. . . purely logical, rationalistic, or scientific.” This use “has nothing to do with poetry, the essential characteristic of which is its emotion, as opposed to logic and reasoning.” (5) George Rylands says about the same thing when he claims that ornamentation is calligraphic in poetry, while in prose ornamentation is functional. (6) And Richard Fogle finds that the individual image in poetry has more artistry and more emotion expended on it than the individual image in prose. (3)

All of these able critics are quite simply ignoring the fact that there have been two well defined styles in English prose—the plain and the ornate. What Jennings, Rylands, and Fogle say of prose is perfectly true of the plain style. It would fit, let us say, a sermon of Urian Oakes or an essay of Francis Bacon. But what they claim for poetry is just exactly as true of the ornate style in prose. It would be concisely descriptive of John Donne’s use of the image of the tolling bell in his prose “Meditation XVII” or of Sir Thomas Browne’s use of a number of images in his prose “Hydriotaphia.”

Jennings further indulges in proof through selectivity when he says that “typical prose cools the mind to the temperature of pure reason; poetry fires all the emotions as does life itself.” (5) John Milton also spoke of “the cool element of prose.” And Cleanth Brooks says that prose is “intellectual rather than emotional, clever rather than profound, rational rather than divinely irrational.” (2) But by the same process of selection one might use William Jennings Bryan’s “Cross of Gold” speech, Chapter VII of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the latest blatherings of Robert Shelton, Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, to show that prose is white-hot, rhapsodical, or completely irrational.

Since earliest times the lunatic, the lover, and the poet have been regarded as phenomena apart, and it has been expected of them that they speak a special and ecstatic language. The facts that they are often not in a disturbed state and that they have no monopoly on ecstasies anyway must, of course, be ignored by those who insist upon tidy categories for language. By picking and choosing among the evidence it is easy to show that the language of poetry differs from the language of prose.

Some time ago I spent an evening and a night in a hall bedroom whose offerings in the way of literary edification and delight consisted

of a worn, leather-bound copy of something named *Memorial Volume. Dedicatory and Opening Ceremonies of the World's Columbian Exposition*, edited by "The Joint Committee on Ceremonies of the World's Columbian Exposition," Chicago, 1893. As I was unable to attend the World's Fair of 1893, one may well imagine that I seized avidly upon this opportunity to visit it vicariously.

I found my time well spent. Here, for example, is a clear-cut gem of straightforward prose from the chapter entitled "Mr. Ferris and the Wheel":

Thirty-six cars are suspended from the wheel. The cars are 27 feet long, 13 feet wide and 9 feet high, and are hung at equal distances around the wheel on a steel pin 6½ inches in diameter, passing through the roof of the coach to each side of the outer rim. The frames are of steel, covered with wood, and the occupants can look in any direction through the windows, of which there are five on each side, consisting of large panes of plate glass, which can be lowered at will, each guarded by an iron grating intended to prevent people from falling out.

Now this is prose, and nobody can argue the fact. It is simple, analytic, unimpassioned, logical, and as cool as a sliced cucumber. There isn't a metaphor in it, except for such petrified and unrecognizable ones as *suspended* and *hung*. It is obviously designed to serve the reader's understanding. This is prose as the categorizers like to find it.

Unfortunately for the categorizers it is identical in approach, tone, and method with:

I've measured it from side to side;
It's six feet long and three feet wide.

Yet this is poetry, inasmuch as it certainly isn't prose. In both selections the author has something to say, and nothing got in the way of his saying it.

Now the author of "Mr. Ferris and the Wheel," carried away by his enthusiasm for Mr. Ferris's great work, also gives us this—still remaining in what must be admitted to be prose.

Its superior excellence as a conception of the human brain has been acknowledged by the greatest thinkers of all the world's continents, and Mr. Ferris has been placed upon such a pinnacle, that when the future historian comes to survey the character of his work, he will find it rising above the undulating plains of humanity like a huge mountain in the desert, and like the orbs of those who walk in the Midway, he will have to lift his eyes

high toward heaven to catch its summit. It is such a masterful stroke of genius, so carefully conceived, and so successfully executed, that intelligence, viewing the creation from any standpoint, must do it homage.

It is obvious that something has happened in the mind of the writer between this coloratura ovation and the simple, analytical, unimpassioned, logical, and cool description quoted earlier. No longer are we asked to estimate the achievement of Mr. Ferris in terms of steel pins $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, iron gratings, large panes of plate glass which can be lowered at will, and fraternal solicitude for careless people who fall out of Ferris wheels.

Now we see the achievement of Mr. Ferris relieved of mechanical minutiae and projected into association with—even identity with—huge mountains in the desert, “rising above the undulating plains of humanity.” And Mr. Ferris himself has been lifted from his drafting board and blueprint paper and seated upon a pinnacle, doubtless near the mountain, where he can watch and take satisfaction in the upward rolling orbs of humanity.

Why have Mr. Ferris and his work been illuminated with such verbal pyrotechnics? If Jennings, Rylands, Brooks, *et al.* are right in their conception of “the language of prose,” then it must be for purposes of the understanding. But for purposes of the understanding no such pinwheels of rhetoric would have to be touched off. A simple statement like, “The Ferris Wheel is regarded by the world’s greatest thinkers as an outstanding engineering achievement, and future generations will regard Mr. Ferris’s work as immensely important” would cover the same ground and be much more readily understandable to any reader. The writer’s aim is to fire the emotions of the reader just as much as they would have been fired if the reader had joined his orbs to those of the Midway crowd who saw the phenomenon on the spot. There is nothing analytic, classifying, or logical about it. And I think it’s a bit irrational, though I wouldn’t say divinely so. Yet, I repeat, it must be admitted to be prose.

Bearing in mind Mr. Rylands’ statement that metaphor is calligraphic in poetry and functional in prose, I should like to produce another gem from the *Memorial Volume*. The Honorable Henry Waterson delivered the “Dedicatory Oration” at the Exposition of 1893. He operated strictly in prose, and one of his sentences follows:

No one who has had the good fortune to see the models of this extraordinary work of art can have failed to be moved by the union, which it embodies of the antique in

history and the current life and thought; as beginning with the weird mendicant fainting upon the hill-side of Santa Rabida, it traces the strange adventures of the Genoese seer from the royal camp of Santa Fe, to the sunny coasts of the Isles of Inde, through the weary watches of the endless night, whose sentinel stars seemed set to mock, but not to guide; through the trackless and shoreless wastes of the mystic sea, spread day by day to bear upon every rise and fall of its heaving bosom the death of fair fond hopes, the birth of fantastic fears; the peerless and thrilling revelation, and all that has followed, to the very moment that beholds us here, citizens, free-men, equal shareholders, in the miracle of American civilization and development

Note that if the Honorable Watterson had been bent upon conveying a thought to the understanding he could have said, "Everyone is impressed by seeing, at the Exposition, the juncture of the past with the present"—and covered the ground adequately.

Note, also, that he does not seem particularly intent upon arousing emotion. Calling Columbus a "weird mendicant" and a "Genoese seer" in the same sentence would be a preposterous attempt to arouse fear, pity, contempt, awe, respect, and trust—all for the same object at the same time. There would be no point to such a verbal banzai charge.

No, Mr. Watterson is only being ornamental, fancy, rococo. There is no more solid purpose in the glittering embroidery of this sentence than there was in the curlicues and birds with letters in their bills which old time masters of penmanship used to ornament their signatures with in Mr. Watterson's day. He is simply being calligraphic—in prose.

To attempt to differentiate between the uses of metaphor in poetry and the uses of metaphor in prose—between the language of poetry and the language of prose—is only to run into contradictions and exceptions at every turn. And finally to try to over-leap them by arbitrary decisions which are vulnerable from a hundred directions.

As Shelley said, "The distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error."

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Charles Allen Smith, an Associate Professor of English at Western Michigan University, is co-author of "The Metropolitan Transportation Dilemma," published by the Society of Automotive Engineers. He wrote the script for an award winning industrial movie, and his weekly radio show was selected for a national award as one of the top ten in its class in radio and television. Mr. Smith is also a popular after dinner speaker.