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Prose and Verse

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(I) The Distinction

The distinction between prose and verse is supposed to be such that one can easily and obviously tell it at a glance.

With verse the length-line or to be precise, the number of syllables in a line is fixed beforehand, and it follows that the number of lines in every poem seldom, if ever, varies, whatever the width of the page may be. Each line begins with a capital letter.

With prose, on the other hand, the length of a line differs according to the size of paper. Only the first word of a prose sentence begins with a capital letter.

That is why the number of a line can be mentioned too, for a quotation from verse, while this is generally not the case with prose :

To be, or not to be : that is the question.

Hamlet : Act III. Scene 1. 1. 56

Ask, and it shall be given you.

Matthew : Chapter 7, Verse 7

(II) Is the Distinction Really Easy ?

- (a) No one should visit Seville
Without paying particular attention
To the Alcazar, that splendid
Specimen of Moorish architecture.
- (b) I heard a thousand blended notes, while in a grove I sate reclined,
in that sweet mood when pleasant things bring sad
thoughts to the mind:
- (c) Nay, there is no time, she answered,
Glancing at a jewelled timepiece,

Scarcely larger than an oyster,
 Which she drew from near her waistband ;
 And then she pushed it away in confusion,
 Lest its wealth should startle me.

- (d) I say she's dead ; I'll swear't. If word nor oath prevail not,
 go and see : if you can bring tincture or lustre in her lip, her
 eye, heat outwardly or breath within, I'll serve you as I would
 do the gods.

At first one will think that (a) and (c) are verses, and (b) and
 (d) prose.

If one reads them carefully, however, one will find that a trick is
 being played. As a matter of fact, (a) and (c) are prose, and (b)
 and (d) are verses. Now they are given below in their proper arrange-
 ment,

- (a) No one should visit Seville without paying particular attention
 to the Alcazar, that splendid specimen of Moorish architecture.
- (b) I heard a thousand blended notes
 While in a grove I sate reclined,
 In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
 Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

Written in Early Spring by W. Wordsworth

- (c) "Nay, there is no time," she answered, glancing at a jewelled
 timepiece, scarcely larger than an oyster, which she drew from
 near her waistband ; and then she pushed it away in confusion,
 lest its wealth should startle me.

Richard D. Blackmore : Lorna Doone

- (d) I say she's dead, I'll swear't. If word nor oath
 Prevail not, go and see : if you can bring
 Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye,
 Heat outwardly or breath within, I'll serve you
 As I would do the gods.

Shakespeare : The Winter's Tale 111, 11, 201—205

However cleverly and artfully prose may be chopped up into
 measured lines and written as if it were verse, that would not make

prose verse, though careless readers might sometimes be deceived.

Verse may be written, on the other hand, in the form of prose, running on from end to end of the line, without attempting to show the measure of the lines; still it will never lose all the essential qualities of verse. Verse is verse, in spite of any appearances that might incline one to believe it were prose.

Though this superficial distinction between prose and verse is not so important or essential as the fundamental difference, (if there should be any,) that lies beneath it, the appeal of the verse-form to the eye should not be neglected either, since the form in which verse is written no doubt helps us to appreciate its fundamental qualities.

(III) The Bible and The Forms

No distinction is made between prose and verse in the Authorized Version of the Bible. The Psalms, the Song of Solomon, and the other poetical books are in prose-form, yet the difference can be discovered if attentively read.

It is very interesting to find prose and verse works arranged in their proper forms in THE MODERN READER'S BIBLE by Richard G. Moulton.

The Song of Solomon : 1, 2

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth :

For thy love is better than wine ;

Thine ointments have a goodly fragrance ;

Thy name is an ointment poured forth :

Therefore do the virgins love thee.

The Psalms :

1 : 1 Blessed is the man that walketh in the counsel of
the wicked,

Nor standeth in the way of sinners,

Nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

1 : 2 But his delight is in the law of the Lord ;

And in his law doth he meditate day and night.

(IV) The Best Words in the Best Order

Coleridge defined prose as “words in good order,” poetry as “the best words in the best order.” But “these is no reason,” as a writer says, “why prose should not be the best words in the best order.” The better the words and order, the better not only in verse but in prose, too.

“Prose is the language,” says J. Middleton Murry in his ‘Problem of Style,’ “not merely of exact thinking, but of exact description. A description, whether of a country, a wanted criminal, or the contents of a room, if it is to be exact, must be in prose.”

(V) Some Characteristics of Verse

Let me here enumerate some characteristics of verse.

(1) It is very interesting to find elaborate poetical expressions, the same meaning of which can be expressed simply in a few words in prose.

Examples :

- (a) Wake ! For the sun, who scatter'd into flight
The Stars before him from the Field of Night,
Drives Night along with them from Heav'n, and strikes
The Sultan's Turret with a Shaft of Light.

Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam of Naishapur

This stanza of four lines is very beautiful, and it means, “Day has dawned ; the sun is risen.”

- (b) The curfew tolls the knell of parting day

Elegy written in a Country Churchyard by T. Gray

In prose this famous line means it is night.

- (c) (Dropping) from the veils of the morning to where the
cricket sings.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree by W. B. Yeats.

This line simply means “from morning till night” in prose.

(2) There are some words commonly used in verse, but not in prose — those mentioned as (poet.) in the dictionary.

Examples : morn, eve (evening), even (evening), thou, thy, thee, billow, vale, steed, erst, anon, ere, singeth, cometh, aught, spray (small branch, twig, with flowers), warble, lay (song), nigh, bower

(3) The order of words is often changed in verse.

Examples : (a) Of his bones are coral made. *The Tempest*

(b) If ever deed of honour did thee please.

Milton's Sonnet (8)

(c) Guard them, and him within protect from harms.

Ibid. (8)

(d) The better part, with Mary and with Ruth,
Chosen thou hast. *Ibid. (9)*

(e) So well your words his noble virtues praise.

Ibid (10)

(4) Words or syllables are often missing or extra ones are added in verse.

Examples :

(Missing) (a) And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. *As You Like It.*

(b) Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant
there. *The Merchant of Venice*

(c) o'er lands and seas *Milton's Sonnet (8)*

(d) To save th' Athenian walls. *Ibid (8)*

(e) o'er the lea *Gray's Elegy*

(f) th' inevitable hour. *Ibid.*

(Added) (g) The throned monarch better than his crown.

The Merchant of Venice

('Throned' is here a dissyllable.)

(h) Captain, or Colonel, or Knight in Arms.

Milton's Sonnet (8)

('Colonel' is here a trisyllable.)

(i) And on the neck of crowned Fortune proud.

Ibid (16)

('Crowned' is here a dissyllable.)

(5) As 'poetic license' signifies, rules of grammar are often broken.

Examples :

- (a) Whether the Muse or Love call thee his mate.
Milton's Sonnet (1)
 N. B. Love, i. e. Cupid, is masculine, but Muse,
 one of the nine goddesses, is feminine.
- (b) The smith, a mighty man is *he*.
The Village Blacksmith by Longfellow
- (c) I have *spoke* thus much.
The Merchant of Venice
- (d) When thou hast *broke* it in so dear degree. *Richard III*
- (e) To be *spoke* to but by the recorder. *Ibid.*
- (f) 'Twere best not *know* myself. *Macbeth*
 (The sign of the infinitive is omitted after "best not".)
- (g) Time and the hour runs through the roughest day. *Ibid.*
 (Singular verb with plural nominative.)

(6) In verse we find figures of speech—simile, metaphor, personification, apostrophe, hyperbole, euphemism, alliteration, antithesis etc., used more lavishly than in prose. While the prose-writer is often satisfied with direct statement of facts, the poet is not, and he frequently appeals to images which are full of pleasure to one's mind, by using words which give pleasure to one's ear.

Examples :

- (a) Simile : Errors, *like straws*, upon the surface flow. *Dryden*
Like Niobe, all tears. *Hamlet*
As two spent swimmers, that do cling together. *Macbeth*
- (b) Metaphor : Come not between the *dragon* and his wrath.
King Lear
 Detested *kite* ! thou liest. *Ibid.*
- (c) Personification :
 My *gashes* cry for help. *Macbeth*
Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend. *King Lear*
- (d) Apostrophe : Come, thick *night*,
 And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell. *Macbeth*
 O most small *fault*,
 How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show. *King Lear*
- (d) Hyperbole : The multitudinous seas incarnadine,

Making the green one red. *Macbeth*
For thou hast made the happy earth thy hell.

Richard III

(f) Euphemism : Is he dispatched? *Macbeth*

The sons of Edward sleep in Abraham's bosom.

Richard III

(g) Alliteration :

The ploughman homeward plods his *weary way*.

Gray's Elegy

And yet *wouldst wrongly win*.

Macbeth

For false forswearing and for murder too.

Richard III

A very *caitiff crown'd with care*.

Ibid

(h) Antithesis :

So foul and fair a day I have not seen.

Macbeth

Look like the innocent flower,

But be the serpent under't.

Ibid

And seem a saint when most I play the devil.

Richard III

Talkers are no good doers.

Ibid.

(VI) Rhyme and Rhythm

It is generally said that verse has both rhyme and rhythm, while prose has neither. But this a misconception which is easily proved. The blank verse in which are written *Paradise Lost*, certain sections of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and the greater part of Shakespeare's plays, shows that some verse has no rhyme, called "the jingling sound of like endings" by Milton, and yet very good verse at that.

What about rhythm, then? Verse must be first and foremost rhythmical. It is rhythm that makes verse. Well, has prose no rhythm? What is rhythm?

"All life expresses itself in rhythm," says Sir Stanley Leathes. "There is a rhythm of movement, a rhythm of form, a rhythm of sound, a rhythm of the days and the nights, and of all living things Dancing, and music, and speech, strive to express the inward rhythms of our souls, our minds, and our spirits."

It is quite natural and beyond question that English, "perhaps the most flexible living instrument of human speech" has rhythm not only in verse but also in prose. Nay, not only prose, but ordinary speech is rhythmic. Rhythmless passages are rather hard to find among the works by well-known authors.

"Rhythmless speech or writing is," writes H. W. Fowler, "like the flow of liquid from a pipe or tap; it runs with smooth monotony from when it is turned on to when it is turned off, provided it is clear stuff; if it is turbid, the smooth flow is queerly and abruptly checked from time to time, and then resumed. Rhythmic speech or writing is like waves of the sea, moving onward with alternating rise and fall, connected yet separate, like but different, suggestive of some law, too complex for analysis or statement, controlling the relations between wave and wave, waves and sea, phrase and phrase, phrases and speech. In other words, live speech, said or written, is rhythmic, and rhythmless speech is at the best dead."

(VII) Prose Rhythm

Prose that reads well and prose that reads badly mean that the former is rhythmical and the other rhythmless.

Though it is true to some extent there is a certain regular recurrence of feet in verse, while there is or ought to be no such recurrence in prose, it is also true that there is and must "up to a point" be rhythm in prose. That is to say, *not a regular recurrence of one or two kinds of rhythm, but an infinite variety of rhythm*—"a succession of feet, consisting of words," can be heard in prose.

"The great principle of foot arrangement in prose, and of Prose Rhythm, is Variety," according to Professor Saintsbury.

Verse is defined by Herbert Read, "as a mode of expression which is strictly related to a regular measure or metre, and prose as a mode of expression which avoids regularity of measure and seeks the utmost variety of rhythm."

"All literary language is rhythmic," says R. G. Moulton, "but there is a difference: the rhythm of verse is recurrent rhythm, and the

rhythm of prose is *veiled rhythm* and *never obtrusive*. The rhythmic difference between verse and prose is a difference of degree." If we examine the rhythm of two kinds of English writing, we can consider "the more irregular as prose and the more regular as verse." "In typical prose, rhythmical structure, though existing, is not brought to the front, but takes a secondary place in consciousness," D. S. MacColl

Prose which etymologically means 'straightforward' is a freer medium "of clear statement, of argument, of logic, and demands for these the utmost flexibility of stress" according to MacColl.

MacColl invites us to "regard Prose and Verse as not sharply divided entities under separate laws of rhythm, but as, in their characteristic forms, the extremities of a continuous chain, the variation being from freedom of syllable and emphasis towards strictness of foot and metrical pattern."

Shakespeare, "the first to mingle organically, in dramatic composition, blank verse and rhyme and prose," maintains a clear distinction between verse and prose. "Servants and jesters always speak prose, and others also in light conversation, but the language of emotion and passion is invariably metrical." *Art of Versification And The Technicalities Of Poetry* by R. F. Brewer p. 5.

'Julius Caesar' is a very good illustration of this. It begins in everyday prose, as it is suitable for artisans' gossip in the streets, but when the patricians enter, the language becomes rhythmical — good blank verse. The change of Brutus's speech, however, when he addresses the crowd after the murder of Caesar, from "plain, direct prose" to verse is very remarkable, while Antony's eloquent speech is metrical throughout.

Tennyson is said to have told his friends that "he had smoked three cigars over a line that seemed to be almost spontaneous." The art and the mechanism must be concealed, and should not be apparent, in rhythm as in everything else. "The truly rhythmic prose writer satisfies at once the ear and the mind, as a skilled dancer satisfies at once the ear and the eye, without drawing attention to the means by which the effect is attained."

As good pictures have aesthetically good elements, so good sentences

have them, too.

It is said of such sentences that "no analysis can define their charm, still less can it detect the secret of it. The charm is a thing to be felt, not described, and it will be felt by anyone who reads them attentively and often." *Golden Treasury Book One*, p. 132

While this is quite true, we ask, however, if no analysis is possible. Yes, it is. The careful and close study of prose rhythm and cadence, both of which constitute *Rhythm of Prose*, is the method for analyzing the charm and beauty of sentences.

The analysis vividly shows aesthetically good and beautiful elements which make beautiful sentences.

Some sentences sound exactly like poetry, and they are indeed full of beautiful elements, when analyzed by the measure of prose rhythm and cadence.

Their metrical units are irregular, because that is what makes for prose. Nor does the irregularity create chaos, for regularity in seeming irregularity is what makes prose beautiful.

I am going to quote a number of extracts from prose of very high quality, but let me first mention a list of the feet which are utilized in prose rhythm, numbering no less than thirty kinds of feet, while there are only four or five kinds in verse. They can be grouped into four types as follows:

(VIII) Four Types of Prose Rhythm

Rising Rhythm

Iamb	× ' /	I read ; with eyes
Anapaest	× × ' /	I have seen
Anti-bacchic	× ' ' /	She looked back.
4th Paeon	× × × ' /	and I myself
Ionic a minore	× × ' ' /	which amongst tombs
5th Dochmiac	× × × × ' /	and upon her deck
6th Dochmiac		
by grace slur	× × × × × ' /	
7th Dochmiac		

by grace slur	x x x x x x /	
Falling Rhythm		
Trochee	/ x	passion ; rapture
Dactyl	/ x x	happiness ; sympathy
Bacchic	/ / x	too fearful
1st Paeon	/ x x x	passionately
Ionic a majore	/ / x x	too passionate
1st Dochmiac	/ x x x x	interestedly
1st Dochmic		
by grace slur	/ x x x x x	(6 syllables)
1st Dochmiac		
by grace slur	/ x x x x x x	(7 syllables)
Waved Rhythm		
Amphibrach	x / x	of sudden ; in churches
Cretic	/ x /	forty years
2nd Paeon	x / x x	humanity
3rd Paeon	x x / x	by the shadows
Antispast	x / / x	are too early
Choriamb	/ x x /	taking the shape
Di-iamb	x / x /	that once in youth
Di-trochee	/ x / x	bending forward
2nd Dochmiac	x / x x x	predominantly
3rd Dochmiac	x x / x x	and interpreted
4th Dochmiac	x x x / x	upon the gorgeous
2nd Dochmic		
by grace slur	x / x x x x	
3rd Dochmiac		
by grace slur	x x / x x x	
4th Dochmiac		
by grace slur	x x x / x x	
5th Dochmiac		
by grace slur	x x x x / x	
6th Dochmiac		
by grace slur	x x x x x / x	

x x ' x	' x '	x x ' x
that I cannot	yet recall	without smiling
(3rd Paeon)	(Cretic)	(3rd Paeon)
(Waved rhythm)	(Waved rhythm)	(Waved rhythm)
x ' x x	x x '	x x '
an incident	which occurred	at that time,
(2nd Paeon)	(Anapaest)	(Anapaest)
(Waved rhythm)	(Rising rhythm)	(Rising rhythm)
x x x ' x	' x '	x x ' x
and which had nearly	put a stop	to the immediate
(4th Dochmiac)	(Cretic)	(4th Dochmiac)
(Waved rhythm)	(Waved R)	(Waved rhythm)
x x ' x	x x '	
execution	of my plan.	
(3rd Paeon)	(Anapaest)	
(Waved rhythm)	(Rising rhythm)	

Anapaest	5	Rising rhythm	5
Amphibrach	2		
Cretic	2		
2nd Paeon	1		
3rd Paeon	4	Waved rhythm.....	12
4th Dochmtac	3		

R (5) W (12)

17

W W R W W R W W W R R W W W R

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x ' x	x ' x	x x x ' x	x ' x
The sense	of space,	and, in the end,	the sense
(Iamb)	(Iamb)	(4th Paeon)	(Iamb)
(Rising rhythm)	(")	(")	(")
x ' x	x ' x	' x x x	x ' x
of time,	were both	powerfully	affected.
(Iamb)	(Iamb)	(1st Paeon)	(Amphibrach)
(")	(Rising R)	(Falling R)	(Waved rhythm)

Iamb	5		
4th Paeon.....	1	Rising rhythm.....	6

1st Paeon..... 1	Falling rhythm 1
Amphibrach 1.	Waved rhythm 1

R (6) F (1) W (1)

8

R R R R R R F W

(3) p. 245, ll. 8.....11

x / x	x /	x x / x	/
The morning	was come	of a mighty	day —
(Amphibrach)	(Iamb)	(3rd Paeon)	(Mono.)
(Waved rhythm)	(Rising R)	(Waved R)	(Level_R)
x /	x / x	x x / x x	/
a day	of crisis	and of ultimate	hope
(Iamb)	(Amphibrach)	(3rd Dochmiac)	(Monosyl.)
(Rising R)	(Waved rhythm)	(Waved rhythm)	(Level rhythm)
x / x	/ x	x / x x	x / x
for human	nature,	then suffering	mysterious
(Amphibrach)	(Trochee)	(2nd Paeon)	(Amphibrach)
(Waved R)	(Falling R)	(Waved Rhythm)	(Waved rhythm)
x /	x / x x	x x /	x / x x
eclipse,	and labouring	in some dread	extremity.
(Iamb)	(2nd Paron)	(Anapaest)	(2nd Paeon)
(Rising R)	(Waved rhythm)	(Rising rhythm)	(Waved rhythm)

Iamb 3	Rising rhythm..... 4
Anapaest 1	
Trochee..... 1	Falling rhythm 1
Amphibrach 4	
2nd Paeon 3	Waved rhythm..... 9
3rd Paeon 1	
3rd Dochmiac 1	
Monosyllable 2	Level rhythm 2

R (4) F (1) W (9) L (2)

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W R W L R W W L W F W W R W R W

(XI) Conclusion

It is not easy to put into exact words the difference between prose and verse, though the distinction might be said to be *easy*, as far as appearances are concerned.

The dividing line is indeed often obscure, just as that of animals and plants, because much so-called prose has poetic qualities, and much so-called verse those of prose.

It is interesting to find that a good deal of what is commonly regarded as prose is essentially verse, and a good deal of more of what is commonly regarded as verse is essentially prose.

It is worth attention that “uninspired verse, perfect though its metre may be, cannot rise from the earth,” because it has no wings.

It is often remarked that there is something more in verse than in prose — something mysterious and undefinable; that something which “expresses someone’s feelings and attempts to awaken the corresponding emotions in the heart of another.”

In the conclusion, that something which distinguishes prose from verse is, in plain English, the irregularity and regularity of rhythm. It is rhythm that helps to make prose and verse refined and beautiful.

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