

# In Response To Kryssy's Accusation

That Will's First Prose Piece Is Not, In Fact, Well-Considered Prose At All,  
But Actually Poetry

by Wythe

*Abusing several segments of my unfinished, unpublished, infinitely-long essay  
Prose/Poem, with addenda specific to the case in question:*

The inherently nonfissile nature of prose and poetry is such that the two resemble one another. Even as one runs toward the pole of "poetry," for example, we must acknowledge Ashbery, Edson, and Tate. You could arrange most Vasko Popa poems into a few paragraphs, punctuate them, and then you would have ostensible "prose," which is to say nothing of the work of Simic, which is often already close to "prosaic" in its association-by-expanding-association construction. (Like the simplicity of: "How much death works, / No one knows what a long / Day he puts in.")

And these men are all "post-moderns." If we travel back to Eliot, to Auden, or to the Fascist Pound, we encounter a whole range of "meters" that tend to sound like prose to us now. We no longer write elegant, complicated meter; to do so is considered mannered, by some.

So some poetry, I think, is turning into prose, is "prosifying," which is not necessarily a bad thing, especially because, though virtually no one complains that poetry is too prosaic, many people complain that prose—especially the prose of gifted, enthusiastic young writers—is too poetic.

(And that's true too. By my last term, I would have dropped out of college at once if I had had to read one more freshman workshop piece about female sexuality oozing with words like "scintillating," "flowering," [a list of colours, steeped in blacks and bloods], "tantalizing," "mesmerizing," "plethora," "myriad," and—well, the list of Hated "I'm A Poet Writing A Story About How No One Understands Me" Words goes on; *abyssus abyssum invocat...*)

But before I leave the subject of poetry, one story: I recently picked up chapbooks by two students of the Columbia Graduate School of Poetry. The books were sold in 2005 for an enormous \$12 each; I bought them for \$2 outside a bookstore in Williamsburg. Both books were short and dogshit terrible. And, of course, prosaic and all-about-me, with not a single intelligible statement or poetic image between them. The point is: All modern poetry looks and feels like prose. It *simulates* (acts exactly like/is

indistinguishable from) prose; therefore, according to Baudrillard, it *is* prose. The same could work, one imagines, in reverse.

But I myself prefer to write short stories that are so short, so image-conscious, and so... poetical that my readers regularly call them "prose poems." I started by calling them "stories," then, when I delved more deeply into Borges, "fictions," but neither of these terms seem quite right; the former is too vague; the latter, too specific to one man's usage of it. Now I call what I write "short short shorts" or "very short shorts," but, more often, "prose poems," simply because this is what I think my readers (what few there are) "want."

But more important that title-of-genre is shape-of-work, and this is where we somehow return, having passed through the "poetry" (from Browning to Eliot to Ashbery) into "prose" (from James to Joyce to Beckett to Rikki Ducornet, one of the best living writers, who very often lets "poetic-" looking hobgoblins invade her beautiful short short stories), to "poetry" again, and for this one exceedingly clear reason: "Poetic" devices such as lineation (meaning "breaks after each line," or "breaks not necessarily following the syntax of the paragraph"), rhyme, alliteration, and the like occur frequently, sometimes beautifully, and very often randomly in "normal prose."

(Please excuse my pullulating quotation marks, but I want the idea that poetry and prose have, over the course of the five thousand years bridging Homer to Ashbery and Sir Thomas Browne to Phillip Roth, moved into one another's castles, so to speak.)

(Or, simpler, one of my favorite quotations: "Of a sudden things become mortal that before had learned to be immortal, and things unmixed before mixed." —Empedocles, from Aristotle's *Poetics*, trans. Butcher.)

For example, I might accidentally hit "enter" after a given line in a given email but choose not to correct the mistake because the email is to a friend, is of no great importance. Have I created "poetry?"

Or consider this: What is rap music? Rap music is typically rhymed but is "metered" only in that the last few sounds tend to match up, and most of that is due to the rapppppa'z slurring of those sounds, his phonetic metaplazmus (intentional misspelling). And I in no way condemn this slurring; I listen almost exclusive to rap; as a writer, reader, and long-winded joketeller, I find that other genres of music simply lack a sufficiently high WPM (words-per-minute) quotient to keep me interested.

But... isn't rap really "prose?" If you write down a rap, you break when the rapper rhymes, break again when he rhymes again. This looks like poetry. But say the rap out-loud, without slurring the end-sounds at all: Does it sound like "poetry," like "Ozymandius of Egypt" or "Shall I Compare Thee To A Summer's Day?" or "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner?"

(And the rap may indeed resemble a classical poem, but it will be a wonderful gift. Most rap will have far too rhetorical, too swaggering a gait, be far too concerned with a few themes [the writer's bravado, the search for wealth, an almost Sufic quest for "realness," etc.], and make use of a highly limited diction, or a diction of short words that can be easily slanted so as to better resemble one another.)

And there's a reverse to this process of "prosifying" rap as well: As someone highly proficient in all styles of rap from an early age, I can rap any given prose in such a way that it will sound perfectly metered, interestingly rhymed, and overall quite poetical. But has the rapped prose "become" poetry, has it "bloomed" into a somehow more concise or beautiful form? *That*, at this point, is what this game of "prose"/"poetry" is—one of questions and very loose definitions.

(Of course rap can be poetry—has always been. I don't think most rappers are going to start calling themselves "verbal prose stylists" or any such nuisance for a long time. And "poetry" is still a clear and necessary discipline in one sense: It has a through-line, and it has useful rules. We still read Petrarch; we still write sestinas; these pursuits still belong to "poetry," of course. But what is more amazing is how the through-line from Antiquity to the MySpace Era has stood the test of free verse, of imagism, symbolism, Dada, Surrealism, Fascism, the totalitarian Soviets, post-modernism, and even the internet. In fact, "poetry" seems clearer than ever.

Pick up books by any five "good" poets, still living or only just dead, and they will probably resemble each other in that they will not rhyme much, not be lineated regularly all the time, etc. "Poetry" now seems to "clearly" mean the names of those who craft it, who preserve the through-line of beautiful, concise language, of artfully crafted verse, of words that do not have to fight over rhetoric, do not lose themselves in narrative. In words—in other words—that are totally free. And the names—Ashbery, Kunitz, Simic, Pinsky, Oliver, Kooser, Hall, and many, many more—these names are good starting places, good first clues, as to what "poetry" is.)

Of definitions, I was told—by a Professor who teaches at the Columbia Graduate School of Poetry, no less, though I've never attended that school—that "poetry" is simply concise, beautiful language, usually lineated, sometimes not, that relies more on imagery than "ordinary prose." Of course, I'm paraphrasing the outcome of a class discussion, and even then there's plenty of room for debate/refinement/change. You could shorten "poetry" to simply "beautiful, concise language," or even just "beautiful language."

But by that standard, most everything Kafka ever wrote is poetry, even if it couldn't strike the average high school student as more logical, leaden, tediously-wrought, not-concise prose. And yet, Kafka's language *is* beautiful, in English and German, and in any language into which you can translate it. Its beauty is viral. And here I think of Borges again, because he wrote of Kafka and of translation, but also because his is still my favorite definition of poetry.

He said "poetry... [epic, old-man pause]... is the artful craft of verse." Only he said it more like "the *artful craft of verse*" (accented strongly on "art," "craft," and "verse"). It's a phrase word remembering.

We all agree that none of us will ever agree what "art" is, but that art is important, that it somehow reflects truths back to us that we do not see when we look through the lens of science or look up at the welkin of religion. We can make art, even, the same way we can make electricity, but we cannot look at it, really, only at what it reflects. What is art? Is it a well-made cookie? A carefully-arranged series of rocks, left under a bridge by a hobo as a sign for a fellow hobo? A series of paint drops splattered on a canvas by a machine?

These are not new questions. I raise them only to help point out that if it is hard to say what "poetry" is, and poetry is linked axiomatically to art (i.e., poetry is a subset of art, so if we want to define poetry, we must be able to define art), then "art" is utterly beyond definition. Describing "poetry" is describing the image in the mirror—the shifting form, the self you think you see, that looks so cruel and different, because it is separate from the "you" that "knows" who "you" really "are." But art is the mirror itself. We never even see it.

Which is all to say, "the artful craft of verse" is such a lucid definition of "poetry" because, in the first place, it accepts that "poetry" is, like "art," probably not something whose definition humans will ever be able to agree upon. In the second place, it gives us another vague word, almost a synonym for "art" (and why not? "poetry," too, is used to speak of the motions of swords, of eels, of miniature insect-like robots...), this old-seeming word, "verse."

What does it mean? Is it a unit of poetry? Meaning poetry must have units? But prose has an essential unit—two, in fact: The *sentence* mandates the style of our diction, our subtle rhythms, our puns, etc., and the *paragraph* mandates the style of our rhetoric, our thought, our great arcs.

(But poetry doesn't have great arcs, you might say—but then what of Dante, or the Book of Job? Ah, quite right...)

Or is "verse" simply code for "poetry," meaning that all Borges said was: "Write good poetry, and it's poetry?" Maybe. I apply the broadest of views to his definition, as to most definitions, because broad definitions have proven more useful, literarily and evolutionarily, than narrow ones.

(For instance, if you are narrowly a "Christian," "Muslim," "Jew," "Buddhist," or "Hindu," you might forget that you are also a "human," a "son" or a "daughter," etc. I don't demean specific definitions: When you want a cheeseburger and not a hamburger, you only want a cheeseburger—not a hamburger that somehow definitionally fulfills "cheese" in the mind of your Bloopy's Castle server. I only mean to say of "poetry" and "prose" that, because they are both such gigantic realms and because they

are so important to us—this essay is written in "prose," maybe, and, while reading it, you might be listening to "poetry," unless you're listening to rap—I don't see how we can limit what we mean when we say them.)

(So you mean Kafka's beautiful language *is* poetry? Yes, I do. But I mean it the way Borges meant it.)

That all said, it seems there are obvious exceptions. A non-rhyming, non-alliterative legal document that employs no imagery whatsoever would be a hard sell as "poetry," and the works of Bashō, who perfected the *haiku*, are almost without exception built of single images that lack any observable rhetorical point. So they're probably not prose.

Which brings me to my mentor Christopher Miller's favorite author and the fantastical idea that you can define "prose" or "poetry" based almost solely on length (and how you think about length).

To the average person—forget imagery—I could just say "a haiku is a poem because it's short," and I would receive no argument. But if I tried to same with a Lydia Davis "story" (meaning work of "prose") called "Samuel Johnson is Indignant," which is only ten or so words in total, *including the title*, the average person might say, "wait a minute—that *sounds* like prose." But what separates them? They are both very short. Davis' is shorter, in fact. (Definitionally, *haiku* have those famously-arbitrary seventeen syllables.)

And Davis, my mentor's hero and one of the funniest people ever born, has dozens of stories like this, all effective, all very short—half a page or twee-er. They repeat words very, very often (poetry?) but never, ever *sound* like poetry. They always sound like... like tiny stories. (And, yes, one of them is lineated sort of like a poem, though in imitation of a child's handwriting exercise, one per line, not a poem.)

But, this doesn't help with that nagging question... What should I call *my* work...?

\*\*\*

For now let us forget our nightmare task of "definition" and just look at the offending bit of "poetry" itself. Writes Mr. Heyser:

It seems to me that pot pour ri  
Is French for something not quite twee.  
Si "ri" est moi, je ne sais pas,  
Mais qui est l'autre gen, je quoi?  
I wonder if "ri" wants a spliff  
Or whether his mother will catch a whiff.  
Perhaps it's best to let this rest  
Because drug humor at no behest  
Bodes not so well, though who can tell.

Maybe it will make this website sell.

Now, for completion, let me state that, according to my French\*, which is terrible, the third and fourth lines read:

If "laughed" is me, I do not know,  
But who am different the gen, I what?

Given these lines (expressionistic, if not non-sensical, at first read), a few thorough readings, and that Heyser's work certainly rhymes, is broken into regular lines, and uses pungent imagery, one would be inclined to lump it in with "poetry." But the "poem" is arguing something; it uses strong rhetoric, subsuming the image (a blatantly silly one, a spliff, disguised by an aerosol potpourri, a product to which most Miracle Whip-brand Americans have addicted themselves) inside the rhetorical thrust of the poem.

I.e., if Mr. Heyser was not trying to convince us that potpourri (which I refuse to Gallicize unnecessarily, considering he's probably talking about Febreze) is used mostly to disguise pot-smoke, he might have grounded his poem with more than that simple, one-word image, "spliff." We see it right away; we get the point, maybe laugh, and move on. *He* sees it right away, in fact, and goes on to excuse himself, saying no one asked for "drug humor." And he never lights upon a "great theme," nor points out something about nature, or man's inability to not feel sorry for himself while simultaneously fucking himself over.

So is this "poetry?" Language blooming into art?

Or is it prose? An argument lain down; a joke told, but concisely?

Were I pressed to give a "hard answer," I'd redesignate Heyser's work "prose," because it so completely lacks the sort of "artful verse" I've talked about at length above.

I know this is playing same-to-same, in terms of how a given work "sounds," but Heyser's little bon-bon proves something to us (something that *Mission: Impossible* also proved to us, as well as the original *Casino Royale*): Even when we are sure we have caught the thief, we cannot be sure that we have not caught, merely, one our own ninja-like agents pretending toward thief-dom in hopes of penetrating the inner circle of a vicious terrorist group called S.M.E.R.S.H. that wants to develop and release worldwide a serum that will kill every man taller than 5'4" and make every woman gorgeous.

\*\*\*

Thank you. This has been a "Lesson In Talkin Good," sponsored by Chicken®: It's What's In Your Mouth Right Now.

\*The Author's French exclusively courtesy Google™.

