

# Against Prose: Poetry's Defense, Definition, and Dichotomization

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It might sound familiar, the way Ezra Pound declined to debate the distinction between poetry and prose in “The Serious Artist,” a four-part defense of poetry published serially in Dora Marsden’s literary journal, the *New Freewoman*. He explained, “These things are relative,” acknowledging that perceived differences between poetry and prose are little more than conventions and, moreover, that the way we deploy these terms varies depending on context: “Just as we say that a certain temperature is hot and another cold. In the same way we say that a certain prose passage ‘Is poetry’ meaning to praise it, and that a certain passage of verse is ‘only prose’ meaning dispraise. And at the same time ‘Poetry!!!’ is used as a synonym for ‘Bosh! Rott!! Rubbish!!!’” (Pound 1913b: 194). This is not particularly sophisticated literary theorizing; still, Pound demonstrates awareness of genre categories that aligns with our current critical consensus: what we think of as “poetry” and “prose” are cultural constructions, what Michael McKeon (2000: xiv) calls “literary-historical genres,” not atemporal, transnational modes. When Pound goes on to say that “it is nearly impossible to write with scientific preciseness about ‘prose and verse,’” and when he explains how onerous it would be to define each term “as one would define the terms in a treatise on chemistry,” he acknowledges the immense importance of such a project. We know such precision is actually quite possible, as demonstrated in recent scholarship on poetic history; works by Yopie Prins (1999: 2014) and Virginia Jackson (2023, 2005; see

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also Jackson and Prins 2014) on “lyric” are only the most obvious of numerous examples. If Pound’s language is excessive and his logic somewhat slapdash, he signals marked unwillingness to essentialize “poetry” and “prose,” a stance that aligns him with a fundamental tenet of literary studies today.

Yet the way Pound (1913b: 194) demurs is conspicuous: “There is not much use in composing an answer to that often-asked question: What is the difference between poetry and prose?” Indeed, in 1913, this question was not especially often asked; such a topic was only peripherally debated. Entrenched though a binary usage of these terms may seem today, opposing prose to poetry (or prose to verse) was not nearly as common then as it has become.

Scholars generally agree that usages of *poetry* and *prose* shifted dramatically over the last two or three centuries. The dichotomy familiar to us today would have seemed odd as recently as the nineteenth century, as Michael Cohen (2015: 12) explains: “The clean separation of poetry and prose in the study of American literature may seem normal now but would have been baffling in the nineteenth century, when most writers wrote in every genre; poems appeared in newspapers, novels, and other prosaic formats; and readers were promiscuous in their taste.” A common explanation goes that before the dichotomy emerged, *poetry* was still used as a generic term for all creative literature, including prose (LaPorte 2003: 519–20; Markovits 2017: 3; Burt 2019: 5). Such an explanation in turn prompts the question, why did this single generic designation give way to a two-part one? Studies have long focused on the rise of prose fiction, especially the novel (Lukács 1983; Watt [1957] 2001; Armstrong 1987; Davis 1983; Bender 1987; C. Davidson 1986; McKeon [1987] 2002, 2000; Price 2000; Moretti 2010, 2006; Rosen 2016), suggesting a paradigm shift wherein *poetry* was simply overshadowed by *prose*. Certainly, the ascendant popularity of prose genres altered common usage of *prose* itself. But attending primarily to questions of prose’s position vis-à-vis poetry’s has led to an oversimple understanding of these two as a pair, before and after the paradigm shift. In fact, an emergent poetry-prose dichotomy enabled and was enabled by a wide range of discourses about art, culture, politics, and ethics.

This essay reveals that this dichotomy facilitated many arguments focused less on prose and more on poetry’s cultural value, arguments that grow increasingly anxious about the deteriorating status of what was newly classed exclusively as “poetry.” As a fundamentally conservative impulse of its moment, the desire to cordon off a certain category of texts as poetic and protect their associated writ-

ing traditions moved fluidly alongside other conservative beliefs of the long nineteenth century, including racist and imperialist tendencies. Indeed, the dichotomy rooted itself efficiently in emergent pseudoscientific studies such as phrenology; while such studies gave fodder to the racist hierarchies of white supremacists, they likewise fueled myths about the essential nature of language and, in turn, about modes of writing. Pound, like many other intellectuals of his day, found these studies compelling. Moreover, they helped him ground his own instincts about writing, especially the instinct that certain ways of writing were inherently superior to other ones.

Ultimately, Pound uses the narrative of prose's usurpation to present a culture in decline, a way of painting poetry as a bastion of essential good. As "The Serious Artist" continues—and as Pound proceeds to offer up a surprisingly detailed response to the poetry-prose question that he had purported to shrug off—Pound winds up charting the separate origins of poetry and prose in our long linguistic history, tracing them all the way back to an imagined moment when communicative speech begins. To give his theories credence, Pound borrows language from nineteenth-century psycholinguistic studies, many of them steeped in a project of white European imperialism. Repurposing these linguists' racist scaffolding, Pound builds his modernist hierarchy of communicative modes with poetry on top.

"The Serious Artist" sets a mold followed by later writers' poetry apologias, who share Pound's dismay at a supposed decline in poets and poetry, viewing it as a symptom of overall cultural decline. Pound's writing also reveals important traces of the discussions that shaped the mold, the various discussions about poetry versus prose taking shape throughout the nineteenth century. To explore this trajectory of the emerging poetry-prose dichotomy is thus to uncover ways that Western cultural superiority still inheres in this, one of our most foundational literary categorizations.

### **Is Poetry Dead Yet?**

To historicize the poetry-prose binary is to redress a handful of simplistic explanations with surprising staying power. Tellingly, Pound's own account of this history is one of them. In Pound's version, serious questions about poetry's primacy date to 1750. According to his essay "How to Read," Pound ([1929] 1965: 31) suggests that such questions are, in fact, entirely owing to French novelist Stendhal:

From the beginning of literature to A.D. 1750 poetry was the superior art, and was so considered to be, and if we read books written before that date we find the number of interesting books in verse at least equal to the number of prose books still readable; and the poetry contains the quintessence. . . .

And one morning Monsieur Stendhal, not thinking of Homer, or Villon, or Catullus, but having a very keen sense of actuality, noticed that "poetry," *la poésie*, as the term was then understood, the stuff written by his French contemporaries, or sonorously rolled at him from the French stage, was a damn nuisance. And he remarked that poetry, with its bagwigs and its bobwigs, and its padded calves and its periwigs, its "fustian à la Louis XIV," was greatly inferior to prose for conveying a clear idea of the diverse states of our consciousness ("les mouvements du cœur").

And at that moment the serious art of writing "went over to prose," and for some time the important developments of language as means of expression were the developments of prose. And a man cannot clearly understand or justly judge the value of verse, modern verse, any verse, unless he has grasped this.

When Pound's Stendhal looks down his nose at poetry as easily as at the wig fashions of Louis XIV's court, his cool superiority recalls Pound himself, with his shrewd skepticism of questions like "What is the difference between poetry and prose?" Pound's admiration for Stendhal is palpable, but Stendhal the prose writer is not ultimately poet Pound's ally, and the vignette is as much a challenge to poetry as a triumph for prose. That Pound is ultimately troubled by this turn toward prose becomes clear as he pivots from hailing Stendhal to interpreting this event's importance for poetry. Panic creeps into the passage as the implications unfold: this affects not only the "the value of verse" but "modern verse, any verse." It is a chilling pronouncement not just for poetry's future but also for its histories and traditions. Pound's take is not serious scholarship, reducing centuries of literary developments to one morning's epiphany. Still, these words have been cited by scholars as straightforward literary history, a testimony to Pound's outsize influence on our notion of a poetry-prose dichotomy (Prickett 1981: 250; Steele 1990: 89).

Another example, David Perkins's landmark *History of Modern Poetry*, is much more thoroughly researched than Pound's but equally misguided when it comes to the dichotomy. In his opening pages, Perkins (1976: 12) claims, "Poetry at the start of the modern period had ceased to be the most important literary genre, its traditional place having been taken over by prose fiction." The foundation of evidence on which Perkins rests his claim has largely eroded. First, the idea that poetry's importance waned in the nineteenth century has been vigorously disputed. Perkins tells us he measures "importance" by criteria such as "quality and quantity of production, size and diversity of audience, appeal to literary talent, and critical prestige," and to say that nineteenth century poetry faded

in quality, quantity, readership, talent, and critical prestige has become simply untenable. Joan Shelley Rubin (2007), Ingrid Satelmajer (2010), John Timberman Newcomb (2012), and Elizabeth Renker (2018) forcefully contest narratives of poetry's decline in the nineteenth century, and the body of criticism attesting to the quality, quantity, readership, talent, and critical prestige of poetry at the end of the nineteenth century is vast and quickly growing. A very brief selected list of important recent works includes Angela Sorby (2005), Michael C. Cohen (2015), and Tricia Lootens (2016).

More to the point, scholars have recently questioned the very practice of historicizing prose fiction separately from poems. Mary Favret (1994), Dino Franco Felluga (1997), Ann Wierda Rowland (2008), Nick Bujak (2014), G. Gabrielle Starr (2015), and Stefanie Markovits (2017) all demonstrate that developments throughout the novel's formation have been so intricately intertwined with lyric traditions that applying simple distinctions like "poem" and "prose" to texts of these eras is futile at best and simply inaccurate at worst. And yet, despite the evidence, Perkins's overarching claim that poetry lost out to prose is still cited as fact (Clausen 1981: 33; Ramazani 2014: 16).

Writing that poetry's "traditional place" had been "taken over by prose fiction" placed Perkins in line with a modern tradition of fearmongering, one fixated on how poetry's prestige was usurped by prose. This idea gained traction amid the frenzy surrounding Edmund Clarence Stedman's unwittingly dire description of his era as "the twilight of the poets," a phrase that would spark a firestorm of debate about the future of poetry. The essay with Stedman's (1885: 800) infamous formulation actually heralds a new generation of poets, predicting "the luster of a still more auspicious day" in American poetry's near future. But the facts of a twilight—that popular figures such as William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had all died within the past decade, and that Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson were well into old age—oversold the sense of impending doom, lending credence to the notion that poetry was literally dying out.

Fears of poetry's impending demise grew. A series of ominously titled treatises has followed, each one heralding doomsday pronouncements: Edmund Wilson's (1948) "Is Verse a Dying Technique?," Christopher Clausen's (1981) *The Place of Poetry: Two Centuries of an Art in Crisis*, Joseph Epstein's (1988) "Who Killed Poetry?," Dana Gioia's ([1991] 1992) "Can Poetry Matter?," Vernon Shetley's (1993) *After the Death of Poetry*, and even Karen Kilcup's (2019) somewhat

facetiously titled *Who Killed American Poetry?*<sup>1</sup> With Kilcup as a notable exception, these writers largely suggest that prose bears the cultural preeminence that poetry once did. Shetley (1993: 28) compares it to a labor crisis: he exhorts his readers to acknowledge that “prose has taken over many of the jobs once performed by poetry and that poetry must give up any idea of retaking that lost turf.” Shetley himself noticed that fears of poetry’s ultimate demise are often exaggerated, and he is among those working to demonstrate how certain arguments trade substance for sensationalism (Perkins 1976: 12; Gioia [1991] 1992: 4–5; Shetley 1993: 167–70). But despite their faults, some of these essays, especially Epstein’s and Gioia’s, share the distinction of being the most prominent recent defenses of poetry, with enviably wide circulation.<sup>2</sup>

Arguments in these essays hinge on the notion that poetry and prose are elemental modes of human communication; to write is to choose between them. This idea is demonstrably false (Godzich and Kittay 1987). Yet Gioia ([1991] 1992: 4) presents such a choice when he gives his cursory history of poetry’s decline: “As verse—which had previously been a popular medium for narrative, satire, drama, even history and scientific speculation—retreated into lyric, prose usurped much of its cultural territory. Truly ambitious writers eventually had no choice but to write in prose.” Epstein (1988: 15) may be less explicit than Gioia about the poetry-prose divide, but he implies the same opposition when describing modern reading habits: “People of general intellectual interest who feel that they ought to read or at least know about works on modern society or recent history or novels that attempt to convey something about the way we live now, no longer feel the same compunction about contemporary poetry.” Poetry, he suggests, is separate from social commentary, history, or novels—genres generally equated with prose. Wilson treads more carefully than Gioia and Epstein,

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1. “My claim is intentionally provocative: poetry, of course, never died,” Kilcup (2019: 2) explains. While Kilcup acknowledges the continuation of poetry (“Poetry both high and low, as some describe it, is everywhere, and has been since the nineteenth century ended”), she does share with the writers mentioned here a belief that something has changed about poetry’s “status.” The difference between Kilcup and these other writers is that it is the loss of a decidedly populist, even lowbrow readership that matters most to her.

2. As Gioia (1992: 5) explains of Epstein, “No recent essay on American poetry has generated so many immediate responses in literary journals,” and he counts thirty writers who have responded in print. For Gioia, the broad response garnered by his essay enabled him to jumpstart a full-time career as a writer and literary critic. The original publication of “Can Poetry Matter?” in *Atlantic Monthly* garnered an overwhelming response, according to Gioia: “more mail than any article the *Atlantic* had published in decades” (xi).

being quick to assert that all our literary categories are historically contingent. One ought to “consider both verse and prose in relation to their functions at different times,” he advises, and he is scrupulous to speak of each as “techniques” rather than essential communicative modes (Wilson 1948: 15). Still, he proceeds to identify examples of each technique throughout Western literature, suggesting a transhistorical view rather than a contingent one. Surveying literature from Aristotle to Auden, he ultimately concludes that in modern literature, this fundamental binary has fundamentally flipped: “The important thing to recognize, it seems to me, is that the literary technique of verse was once made to serve many purposes for which we now, as a rule, use prose.”

Wilson is optimistic about the shift that he observes: prose “is showing itself quite equal” to any good writing in verse, he asserts (30). For Epstein and Gioia, poetry’s diminishment and prose’s rise signal profound cultural decline. Whether hopeful or not, these writers invoke a mythical golden age made more golden because of poetry’s ascendancy. Epstein (1988: 19) traces the contours of that age by listing what are, to him, its exemplary writers: “We shall continue to read Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, perhaps Byron and Browning, to cherish and derive great pleasure from them, but with the understanding that what they did—specifically telling magnificent stories in poetic form—can never be done again.” While Gioia ([1991] 1992: 1) disagrees that the art is lost (and his essay sets out a six-point plan for reviving poetry), he is equally nostalgic, describing poets as “priests in a town of agnostics” who “still command a certain residual prestige.” Poetry’s “intellectual and spiritual influence has eroded,” Gioia mourns, a loss he pointedly contrasts to the influence of the prose novel: “A reader familiar with the novels of Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike, or John Barth may not even recognize the names of Gwendolyn Brooks, Gary Snyder, or W. D. Snodgrass” (3). Even Wilson, despite all his confidence in the “new masters” of emergent prose forms, makes a dark comedy out of the situation. Because he devotes so much of his essay to a celebration of poetry—Aeschylus, Sophocles, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton—it is hard to see much humor in comparing “verse turning to prose” to “the neck of the flamingo in Lewis Carroll with which Alice tried to play croquet” and “the girl in the fairy tale who could never open her mouth without having a toad jump out” (Wilson 1948: 27); one cannot help but feel sorry for the pitiful flamingo, the girl, and, by extension, verse itself. Wilson goes on to insist that a novelist like Dostoevsky is just different, not any “less deep,” “less noble or narrower,” or “less complete than that of the great poets

of the past” (29). Still, to speak of prose as that “practical everyday language of the dominant middle class which has destroyed the Renaissance world” is a tepid endorsement at best.

It may seem obvious at this point, but it bears mentioning that the golden age of poetry invoked by these white male critics is overwhelmingly peopled by Western European and white American men. Epstein and Wilson, especially, are prone to listing favorites in chronological order, beginning in Ancient Greece (Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles) and ending in nineteenth-century England (Keats, Byron, Browning). Epstein and Gioia, writing several decades after Wilson, dwell on twentieth-century writers more than their precursor, but in the case of Epstein especially, this only serves to highlight a preference for white male writers evident in his laudatory lists. He devotes a paragraph to cataloging a select “senior generation” of his era that he bemoans as “large names in the small world in which they operate”: Howard Nemerov, James Merrill, John Hollander, Anthony Hecht, Donald Davie, Hayden Carruth, Donald Hall, W. S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, Richard Howard, Mona Van Duyn, Philip Levine, Maxine Kumin, Derek Walcott, Adrienne Rich, and William Meredith (Epstein 1988: 18). Granted, Epstein’s list of sixteen people includes three women, Black Caribbean poet Derek Walcott, and more than one writer whose Jewish parents immigrated to the United States. Such categories do not concern him in this list; he does not mention them. But in the following paragraph, given over to a younger generation for which he has no admiration at all, Epstein is unusually focused on ethnicity and nationality. Here, he gives us no names but offers instead two anecdotes about poets who are, for him, exemplary of the new generation: “men, both in their thirties. . . . One of the two was a Hawaiian of Japanese ancestry, the other was middle-class Jewish.” His distaste is repeatedly linked to their ancestry, both because that is the primary distinguishing factor he adopts and because he proceeds to highlight, amid his censure, how each presents their culture. He is especially critical of the Hawaiian Japanese man’s relationship to his heritage, observing that he “viewed himself as a spokesman for his people” and pointedly deriding a poem about a cemetery in Hawaii, once a sacred space that was destroyed by real estate development. With these anecdotes, he clearly means to express his distaste for their poetry foremost, and perhaps he thinks he is sparing them from embarrassment by not mentioning their names (although, a few paragraphs later, Epstein argues for a resurgence of the negative book review, admiring how Randall Jarrell “kissed and slapped with equal exuberance,” and it is worth wondering why he is unwilling to slap



more exuberantly himself [19]). Perhaps Epstein's distaste for nonwhite writers might not seem so pronounced if he hadn't already discounted Allen Ginsberg for his political themes: "Poetry isn't really what he is famous for: politics and homosexuality and a talent for the outrageous and a small genius for publicity are the four cornerstones on which his fame rests." Ultimately, it seems, writers like Wilson, Epstein, and Gioia suggest not simply that poetry is not (or has not been) central to our civic and social lives but rather that their preferred canon of poetry writers is no longer valued highly enough. Prose's popularity is a handy scapegoat. But their critiques suggest a more troubling perspective: a preference for a culturally and politically homogenous canon of poets.

### Defending Poetry before the "Age of Prose"

The precursors to these recent writers were similarly concerned with the vitality of the arts in their times, but their arguments about the importance of poetry did not depend on distinguishing poetry from prose. Exemplary is Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* ([1595] 2002), an important model for Pound's defense, which uses *poetry* as a term to encompass fictive literature in general, prose along with traditional verse forms. For Sidney, parsing literary forms offered little tactical advantage in the defense of poetry. After all, Sidney wrote to fend off charges that fiction is essentially all lies and therefore that creative literature has a degenerative effect on its readers, especially compared to the instructive truths of philosophy and history (Bates 2017: viii–ix). Since many genres of fiction—pastoral romances, odes, plays, epic verse, and so on—shared that attribute then under attack, there was little need to separate these texts into any other categories. Sidney has patterned his definition of poetry on Plato's: in Plato's *Republic*, the attack that needs redressing is Socrates's against *poiesis*, a word for mimetic arts in general, derived from the Greek word meaning "to make." Other defenders of poetry from that Renaissance world so vaunted by Wilson, including Joachim du Bellay and Torquato Tasso, likewise drew on Plato's definition (Ferguson 1983: 2–4).

Crucially, poetry's early defenders do account for perceived differences between poetry and prose, but they do so to affirm that such a division is not essential nor primordial. In "Apology for Poetry," Sidney admires the writing of Ancient Grecians Xenophon and Heliodorus, for example, then notes, "Yet both these writ in prose: which I speak to show that it is not rhyming and versing that

maketh a poet—no more than a long gown maketh an advocate, who though he pleaded in armour should be an advocate and no soldier” (87). Poetry can exist as easily in prose as in verse forms, Sidney suggests; form and mode are not essential qualities of poetic creations. Sidney follows Aristotle (1961: 9.2–3) here, who also speaks of verse or prose as neutral features distinct from the fundamental qualities of a text: “For a historian and a poet do not differ from each other because the one writes in verse and the other in prose; for the history of Herodotus might be written in verse, and yet it would be no less a history with metre than without metre.” Here, comparing “prose” to “verse,” not poetry, is a classification that lets these thinkers brush aside prose as a quantifiable attribute. Accounting for prose becomes more akin to the light task of counting syllables than the weighty matter of discerning “history” from “poetry.”

But such an easy distinction rests uncomfortably with Sidney, who pushes the issue further. He notes that, even if poems can be written in prose, “the senate of poets has chosen verse as their fittest raiment,” and he goes on to explain this choice as one between “words as they chanceably fall from the mouth”—that is, prose—and “peizing each syllable of each word by just proportion according to the dignity of the subject”—in other words, verse (Sidney [1595] 2002: 87). Still, this loaded adulation of verse writing has little to tell us about what actually makes verse a “fit raiment” for poetry and more to do with an author’s work ethic. Sidney implies that the writer who lets words “chanceably fall” shows less care than the one who “peizes” each syllable. But couldn’t syllables of prose be peized, too?

That this censure of prose is itself conveyed in prose makes it all the more perplexing. Is Sidney undermining his own argument, admitting it’s only “chanceably” composed? Or is he saying that the defense of poetry is just not “dignified” enough for verse? To critic Catherine Bates (2017: 101–2), moments of internal conflict such as this one occur too frequently and conspicuously in Sidney’s text. She argues that Sidney is keenly aware of such contradictions and uses them to his advantage. Bates’s Sidney is a study in calculated subversion. He toes the party line—in this case, exalting poetry over prose and keeping with Renaissance hierarchies of form—yet opens space for debate in subtle contradictions, such as praising poetry in prose. Indeed, it is “the senate of poets,” not Sidney himself, who prefers verse. If Sidney’s commentary on the status of verse seems too subtle here, it becomes less so when matched with his own *The Old Arcadia* (1580), a text that blends metrical language and paragraphs of prose.

There, Sidney's writing confronts hierarchies of form by blending conventions of verse and prose into one coherent whole.

If the categories of prose, poetry, and verse blur for Sidney, they are even more indefinite for Percy Bysshe Shelley. Rather than divide poetry from prose in his *Defence of Poetry* (1821), Shelley divides poetry. Poetry in a "restricted sense" is his category for a particular variety of texts (Shelley [1821] 2002: 511), and poetry in a "general sense" comprises the universal creative impulse (513). Along with Sidney and Socrates, Shelley's general category draws on the Greek term *poesis* to encompass anything humans devise and enact, including arts like music, dance, and architecture as well as law, civil society, and religions. Poetry in the restricted sense is reserved for written forms, "those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language, which are created by that imperial faculty" (513). Shelley may give special consideration to "metrical language" at the onset, but it is a preference he soon adjusts in order to accommodate prose.

Shelley makes room for prose in his definition of poetry by redrawing the boundary lines between measured and unmeasured language as well as poets and prose writers. He maintains that none of these distinctions are reason enough to exclude a text from poetry in the restricted sense: such divisions are "inadmissible" and "a vulgar error," respectively (514). He proceeds to explain that, rather than writing in verse or prose, what distinguishes poets of the restrictive sense is their capacity to innovate: "Every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his particular versification." From here, the *Defence* proceeds to recognize prose writers whom Shelley considers worthy of the title of "poet" in the restricted sense, and the larger part of this paragraph finds Shelley admiring the prose of Plato and Bacon.<sup>3</sup> His praise is so lavish, in fact, that Shelley only returns to metered verse as an afterthought, appending the discussion of verse, prose, and poetry with a brief nod to Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton. Now, these writers with their "traditional forms of rhythm" are not "less capable . . . than those who have omitted that form," cool praise for our "supreme poets" (515). Although metrical language was singled out

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3. My reading diverges from Oren Izenberg's in *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*. Izenberg (2011: 22) argues that Shelley classes his prose writers only as poets in the general sense. I agree that Shelley singles out metrical language, but he specifically names Plato and Bacon "poets" within a discussion of poetry in the restricted sense while lauding their rejection of traditional measures. Thus, we do not need to press Shelley's argument to encompass "a more capacious formalism," as Izenberg would have it. Shelley himself already welcomes formal innovations of all types as potentially poetic in the restricted sense.

for especial favor just a few paragraphs before, it is now no more “capable” than unmetred prose. Indeed, Shelley’s admiration of these prose writers—especially compared to his relative slight of the other poets—suggests his preference for their particular prose innovations. Plato’s rhythm without “any regular plan” and Bacon’s “strain which distends” are sonic qualities which are indeed remarkable departures from the regularities of metered language.

Evidently, these defenders of poetry were intrigued by the relationship between poetry and prose as they understood such categories and saw them exhibited in their historical moment. But each writer’s attention to these distinctions suggests that poetry was not universally considered a “superior art” or “most important genre,” as Pound and Perkins would have it; indeed, these hierarchies simply don’t apply uniformly across these historical moments. Indeed, these writers also think differently about what counts as “poetry”—and, indeed, how to count poetry’s quantifiable elements, especially elements of verse line and rhythms, which are rarely the easily distinguishing factor they might seem at first.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, these earlier defenses of poetry show us that the question about the difference between poetry and prose is hardly as “often asked” as Pound suggests. Due to the nature of my essay’s focus, granular details of these writers’ arguments are magnified so that they can be adequately explained, especially those sentences that reveal how each writer approaches categories like poetry, verse, and prose. It bears repeating that none of these earlier writers focus their defense of poetry on the cultural status of prose, an argumentative stance that will become so commonplace after modernism. The challenge these writers confront is to imaginative literary texts overall.

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4. Tellingly, it is not just poetry’s defenders who reach for supplemental terms, like “verse” or “metrical language” to try to manage a distinction between poetry and prose. With the rise of prose, its formal conventions gained visibility, leading to critical debate about its distinguishing features. Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s ([1925] 1991) major study *Theory of Prose* is a striking example. Modernists’ debates about the poetic nature of free verse is another: see, for example, the *Chapbook*’s April 1921 issue, subtitled “Poetry in Prose,” with essays by T. S. Eliot (1921), Frederic Manning (1921), and Richard Aldington (1921), and essays in *Poetry* such as “Poetic Prose and Vers Libre” by Alice Corbin Henderson (1913), “Vers Libre and Metrical Prose” by Amy Lowell (1914), and even Pound’s (1913a) “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” which suggests the necessity of a paragraph structure for writing in prose.

### The Distinction Must Be Observed

Even late in the nineteenth century, when Stedman takes up something like Pound's question during the "twilight of the poets," the discussion of poetry versus prose reads like an afterthought. Stedman explores the distinction between poetry and prose in just one paragraph amid an essay about the work of Robert Browning. Stedman (1875: 299) is direct where Sidney and Shelley equivocated: he begins his paragraph by declaring outright that "the distinction between poetry and prose must be sharply observed," a stark shift from the qualifications introduced by writers like Shelley and Sidney.

Drawing the distinction lets Stedman point out a number of attributes belonging to either poetry or prose. But for him, to define poetry is ultimately to show that it is not prose:

We hear it said that an eloquent prose passage is poetry, that a sunset is a poem, and so on. This is well enough for rhetorical effect, yet wholly untrue, and no poet should permit himself to talk in that way. Poetry is poetry because it differs from prose; it is artificial, and gives us pleasure because we know it to be so. It is beautiful thought expressed in rhythmical form, not half expressed or uttered in the form of prose. It is a metrical structure; a spirit not disembodied, but in the flesh,—so as to affect the senses of living men. (Stedman 1875: 299)

Notably, in Stedman's formulation, the binary is itself the definition of poetry: "Poetry is poetry because it differs from prose." Everything else—pleasure, beauty, rhythmical form, and metrical structure—follows only after that distinction.

Stedman's extended aside was challenged in a capacity likewise ancillary to the driving literary debates of the day: in a brief note, an anonymous writer for the *Atlantic Monthly* (1878: 390) "Contributor's Club" singled out Stedman's "war on the confounding of prose with poetry" for pointed mockery, calling his insistence "despotic" and explaining that Stedman's definition of poetry as "beautiful thought expressed in rhythmical form" could apply as easily to a number of prose texts. After mocking Stedman's resolution, the commenter suggested that the distinction between prose and verse, not poetry, might be more easily drawn, but they concede that even this is imprecise: "Mr. Walt Whitman has shown how invisible even this boundary sometimes becomes" (390). While the concession tempers the *Atlantic Monthly* writer's vitriol, the writer's point is clear: no one can or should force "sharp observance" of such a distinction.

This minor note of criticism in the *Atlantic Monthly* stuck with Stedman; two years later, he was still worrying about it. In an 1880 letter to the poet Sidney Lanier, Stedman (1910: 154–55) complained that he had "been taken to task for

insisting, in the ‘Victorian Poets,’ page 299, that the technical distinction between Poetry and Prose must be sharply observed.” That Stedman quotes the page number suggests no small amount of worry on his part, a fixation on that question of the poetry-prose distinction, which had been, quite literally, peripheral to his essay. In writing to Lanier, Stedman hopes for exoneration: “I wish you might glance at that passage, which has subjected me to criticism in the *Atlantic*, and elsewhere” (155). Stedman had reason to expect sympathy from Lanier, who had just published *The Science of English Verse*, a taxonomic compendium equally as concerned as *Victorian Poets* with sharp distinctions. Praise for Lanier’s book takes up most of Stedman’s letter, although he admits he hasn’t quite “mastered it throughout” (154). If only Stedman had mastered a little further, he might not have needed to ask his friend’s opinion of the poetry-prose distinction. Indeed, Lanier (1880: 57) devotes particular attention to prose rhythms in *The Science of English Verse* and argues there that prose is a subset of poetic modes: “Prose, scientifically considered, is a wild variety of verse.” Dismissing even the verse-prose distinction, Lanier’s perspective is still less in sync with Stedman’s view than the *Atlantic* writer’s had been.

Why does Stedman insist on distinguishing between poetry and prose, even when many of his contemporaries oppose his notions? The passage in *Victorian Poets* suggests that Stedman is already reacting to fear for poetry’s survival and that he is mobilizing the distinction to underscore poetry’s specific value in the face of that threat. In fact, Stedman himself admits his distinction does not always hold, but he finds it necessary for counteracting those who foretell of poetry’s inevitable demise. So much is evident in the sequence of his own argument, where such a concession follows a quotation Stedman (1875: 299–300) provides, which he attributes to an unidentified rising poet who is worried about poetry’s future:

It is true that fine prose is a higher form of expression than wretched verse; but when a distinguished young English poet thus writes to me, —

“My own impression is that Verse is an inferior, or infant, form of speech, which will ultimately perish altogether. . . .<sup>5</sup> The seer, the Vates, the teacher of a new truth, is single, while what you call artists are legion,”

—when I read these words, I remember that few great seers have furnished models for the simplest and greatest forms of art; I feel that this poet is growing heretical with respect, not to the law of custom, but to a law which is above us all; I fear to discover a want of beauty, a vague transcendentalism, rather than a clear

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5. Ellipsis in original.

inspiration, in his verse,—to see him become prosaic and substitute rhetoric for passion, realism for naturalness, affectation for lofty thought. . . . In short, he is on the edge of danger.

Stedman fears that the young poet's mindset is not conducive to creating poetry, even if this poet may be right about the inessential nature of poetic genres generally: "His remark denotes a just impatience of forms so hackneyed that, once beautiful, they are now stale and corrupt. It may be necessary, with the Pre-Raphaelites, to escape their thralldom and begin anew" (300). But just as Stedman provides a rationale for setting aside these two categories, "poetry" and "prose," altogether, he decides against it, doubling down on the distinction instead: "But the poet is a creator, not an iconoclast, and never will tamely endeavor to say in prose what can only be expressed in song" (300). Stedman concludes by highlighting poetry's generally superior vitality in comparison to prose's. Ultimately, Stedman implies that when a young poet writes with fears of poetry's doom, a simple dichotomy is an expedient way to dispel such thinking.

No doubt Stedman's defense of poetry at the expense of prose was meant to assuage the fears of more than just one young poet; the notion that poetry "will ultimately perish altogether" was on the rise during this era. Steeped in the logic of racism and imperialism, such thinking held that poetry was a primitive mode of expression, suited for children or "half-civilized people" (Macaulay [1825] 1899: 16). British intellectual Thomas Babington Macaulay had explained as much in his essay on Milton: "the vocabulary of an enlightened society is philosophical, that of a half-civilized people is poetical." While Macaulay may not go so far as to suggest prose is primal poetry's opposite, others were soon to do so. Danish linguist Otto Jespersen (1912: 50), for example, a specialist in the grammar of the English language popular among modernist writers, wrote that poetry was the language of "primitive man" while prose was evidence of a developed, advanced culture. In 1912, just one year before Pound's "Serious Artist" would appear, Jespersen declared that "a good prose style is everywhere a late acquirement, and the work of whole generations of good authors is needed to bring about the easy flow of written prose" (50). Jespersen's theories, even more than Macaulay's, are based on the a priori assumption that what we call poetry is distinguishable from what we call prose and, further, that linguists can trace the roots of these two modes to separate impulses in the human psyche. That Jespersen does not think to question the notion of a poetry-prose divide suggests that the concept of a dichotomy had seeped into the culture considerably by the

time he was writing. By comparison, when Jespersen's precursor and the father of modern psycholinguistics, Franz Joseph Gall (1825: 233), announced that he had isolated the region of the brain responsible for the art of poetry, he went out of his way to observe that this "organ" handled the creation of prose literature, too: "Je n'ignore pas que le génie poétique se manifeste d'ordinaire d'abord par des vers; mais personne ne disconvient que l'on puisse être aussi grand poète en prose" (I do not ignore that poetic genius manifests ordinarily and primarily in verse, but no one could deny that one can also be a great poet in prose).

Pound, even more than Stedman, responds to discussions of poetry and prose arising from psycholinguistic discourses. In "The Serious Artist," he nimbly adapts the lexicon of these language scientists, going further than to just explain the difference between poetry and prose and contradicting the notion that societies evolve from producing poems to producing prose. Ultimately, Pound presents a complete evolutionary explanation for the origins of poetry and prose. While for Jespersen poetry was primitive and prose was a sign of progress, for Pound (1913c: 194) they progress side by side, and both are "but an extension of language":

The whole thing is an evolution. In the beginning simple words were enough: Food; water; fire. Both prose and poetry are but an extension of language. Man desires to communicate with his fellows. He desires an ever increasingly complicated communication. Gesture serves up to a point. Symbols may serve. When you desire something not present to the eye or when you desire to communicate ideas, you must have recourse to speech.

After asserting that poetry and prose emerge from the same desire for more complicated communication, Pound explains how these modes each develop in separate ways. First, he depicts the development of prose, which for him corresponds with the increasing complexity of human ideas: "Gradually, you wish to communicate something less bare and ambiguous than ideas. You wish to communicate an idea and its modifications, an idea and a crowd of its effects, atmospheres, contradictions. You wish to question whether a certain formula works in every case, or in what percent of cases, etc., etc., etc., you get the Henry James novel" (194). Here, prose styles allow for ideological nuances and contexts. In prose, one can test "formulas," a gesture toward the scientific method. Eventually, then, prose gives us Henry James's novels, which Pound admired. Altogether, Pound makes prose seem valuable, if perhaps a little uninteresting; Pound implies as much when he skates between formulas and Henry James with a breezy "etc., etc., etc.," as if what happened in between the two is obvious enough and not worth the effort to explain.



By contrast, Pound describes poetry's development with much greater care and attention to detail. Even when "etc., etc., etc.," reappears, it does not suggest a shortcut so much as unending complexity, as if there is more to say than could possibly fit on the pages of the *New Freewoman*:

You wish to communicate an idea and its concomitant emotions, or an emotion and its concomitant ideas, or a sensation and its derivative emotions, or an impression that is emotive, etc., etc., etc. You begin with the yeowl and the bark, and you develop into the dance and into music, and into music with words, and finally into words with music, and finally into words with a vague adumbration of music, words suggestive of music, words measured, or words in a rhythm that preserves some accurate trait of the emotive impression, or of the sheer character of the fostering or parental emotion.

When this rhythm, or when the vowel and consonantal melody or sequence seems truly to bear the trace of emotion which the poem (for we have come at last to the poem) is intended to communicate, we say that this part of the work is good. (194)

Much more thorough is Pound's (1913a: 200) illustration of poetry's growth compared with prose's as he traces the mode's development from the yeowl to the lyric to something that sounds unsurprisingly similar to imagism, with its "intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"; indeed, Pound's imagist manifesto had appeared in *Poetry* earlier that year. Pound's excitement for poetry is palpable; he rarely pauses for a period and is so eager to arrive at "the poem" that he pauses to announce it only after it appears: "For we have come at last to the poem." Clearly, Pound prefers poetry to prose. But far from gushing, he shows his preference by emphasizing the complexity of poetry compared to that of prose. His poetry grows not from mere ideas, as prose does, but from emotions that have seemingly endless permutations, combining with an idea, multiple ideas, sensations, impressions, and more.

By the end of "The Serious Artist," Pound has neatly refuted Jespersen's telos and the notion that societies inevitably go over to prose. He insists that poetry and prose develop together rather than sequentially. But ultimately, it is poetry, not prose, that is the more sophisticated of the two modes. To Jespersen, prose was the "late acquirement," but for Pound, it must be poetry—a distinctly imagistic poetry—that any sophisticated culture will attain "at last."

### What the Age Demanded

Over time, that persistent question "What is the difference between poetry and prose?" would become more and more pressing to Pound—and increasingly use-

ful for his definition of poetry. After “The Serious Artist,” Pound continued to promote the prose-versus-poetry debate to preserve traditions of poetry, protecting them from a threat he attributes to the encroaching popularity of prose. But he turns away from the lexicon of scientific writing and loses interest, too, in essentialized notions of “poetry” and “prose.” Increasingly, it is the dichotomy itself that matters to Pound: he continues to promote the prose-versus-poetry debate, even against his better judgment, to preserve traditions of poetry against a perceived threat from prose.

His satire *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) evidences how Pound settles on the viability of the dichotomy itself. Now moving past the rhetoric of science, Pound approaches the issue using the strategies of poetry. *Mauberley* is generally accepted as Pound’s goodbye to the London literary scene and a takedown of literary pretensions as such, all conveyed through the experiences of a Pound-like persona, Mauberley himself.<sup>6</sup> How the dichotomy is used as a rivalry becomes part of the pretensions Mauberley navigates: in poem 1, Mauberley is mocked for attempts to “resuscitate the dead art / Of poetry; to maintain ‘the sublime’ / In the old sense,” which is “Wrong from the start,” the poem explains (Pound [1920] 1971: 187). Poem 2 suggests that Mauberley’s motivation for such wrong thinking comes not only from romanticized notions of what poetry was but also from the misplaced idea that poetry would counter prose, itself a source of cultural malaise. What “the age demanded,” to its own detriment, is prose, or so the thinking goes:

The “age demanded” chiefly a mould in plaster,  
Made with no loss of time,  
A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster  
Or the “sculpture” of rhyme. (188)

Setting aside the scare quotes and gentle chiding that signal Pound’s own skepticism of such thinking, what is maligned and what is revered by someone like Mauberley is simple enough to parse. “Prose” is associated with a quickly rendered plaster cast, a cheap art object that is as easily produced as reproduced, neither carefully created nor valuable, and likely a mere copy of an original or some previously existing artifact. This is contrasted with an alabaster sculpture, an object crafted from a fine, soft stone, suitable for carvings of extreme detail, the

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6. For an overview of *Mauberley* that includes an assessment of its narrative voice and that voice’s relationship to Pound himself, see Bush 1990: 59–65.

material of choice for vials of costly perfume found in ancient Egyptian tombs or elaborate relief carvings decorating the walls of Assyrian palaces. These beautiful stone creations are associated with rhyme, that hallmark convention of poetry. Such divisions between poetry and prose play out later on in the poem, too, when Mr. Nixon, the sycophantic writer preoccupied with turning a profit from his pen, advises, “give up verse, my boy, / There’s nothing in it” (194). The Mr. Nixon scene suggests that prose is the medium of choice for those willing to sacrifice art for easy wealth. Those trying to resuscitate a “dead art,” the poem suggests, view “prose” as the tawdry stuff of haste and profiteering while “poetry” is the material for masterful creations of lasting beauty.

But sharp contrasts between poetry and prose quickly break down elsewhere in *Mauberley*. In fact, as poem 1 explains, Mauberley’s “true Penelope was Flaubert”; his true inspiration is a prose writer (187). Likewise, a novelist also inspired Pound: Pound ([1950] 1971: 180) famously described *Mauberley* as “an attempt to condense the James novel,” and he did not mean to disparage James with the comparison but rather to show his appreciation for the elder writer’s work, suggesting he hoped to achieve in stanzas and lines what James had done in the sentences and paragraphs of novels. Even plaster prose is not so easily dismissed as alabaster poetry’s opposite: in fact, ground alabaster is a key ingredient in many types of plaster, a fact sonically reinforced by the rhyme that already links “plaster” to “alabaster.” Thus, the metaphors depicting what the age demanded wind up suggesting that the raw materials of poetry are also what make up prose. In *Mauberley*, it becomes not merely prose nor just bad prose that the age demanded but rather the ability to tell the difference between poetry and prose, even if they are made up of the same thing.

Surely the Pound of *Mauberley* is as interested as the Pound of “The Serious Artist” by that emergent, suddenly forceful question about the difference between poetry and prose. In the “The Serious Artist” Pound pretended there was not “much use in composing an answer” to that question, and in *Mauberley*, the notion of a divide is ultimately ridiculed. By now, it is clearly a useful question, despite its flaws, for the ways it highlights poetry’s value.

### **Equally Real, Equally Unreal**

What has now become an often-asked question has much to teach us about today’s changing genre categories, the role a dichotomy plays in shaping contemporary

notions of “poetry” or “prose,” and how these labels impact the ways we understand texts. In the case of poetry and prose, the two in tandem have become their own categorical convention, used together to define what each is—especially what poetry is. We know the two terms are not complete opposites, but all too frequently we employ them as such. Common usage bears this out: “Prose,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* informs us, is “in contrast with *verse* or *poetry*.”<sup>7</sup> Specialists and practitioners take the pair for granted, too: many university creative writing programs offer students a course of study in either poetry or prose. In publishing, poetry and prose distinctions are customary when collecting the works of those writers best known as poets, even when they wrote in many genres: titles in the Library of America editions of Walt Whitman, Stephen Crane, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Bishop all bear this out with subtitles such as *Collected Poetry and Prose*, and examples from other imprints are too easy to enumerate. Still, this usage runs in the face of equally visible examples that defy the prose/poetry dichotomy. Consider the prominence of the prose poem, a form common to US writers since at least the mid-1800s. The literary establishment recognized such hybrid works once and for all when Charles Simic’s volume of prose poems, *The World Doesn’t End* (1989), won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1991. But even by 1956, writing poetry in prose styles was ubiquitous enough for Frank O’Hara (1995: 262) to quip about his poem “Why I Am Not a Painter,” “It is even in / prose, I am a real poet.” It is apparent that oppositional definitions of poetry and prose are generative, even to those who dispute them. Thus, what Caroline Levine (2015: 14) asserts about literary and social forms applies also to these two broad organizational groupings in literature: they are “equally real in their capacity to organize materials, and equally *unreal* in being artificial, contingent constraints.”

Histories of American poetry are often recounted in terms of the choices made possible through binaries like the one I explore here between poetry and prose. Consider Robert Lowell’s (1960) “raw and cooked,” or a variety of other examples: closed and projective, formalist and antiformalist, symbolist and immanent, speech-based and text-based, or Language and Lyric, to name a few. Such divisions are not always reducible to concrete formal distinctions, like whether to use rhyme schemes or employ pentameter, say. Yet they each lead to questions

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7. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “prose,” <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/152927> (accessed March 2017).

of form, and, more importantly, they are rooted in a national landscape marked by poets' obsession with the significance of these forms. What Stephen Cushman (1993: 5–6) observed nearly three decades ago still rings true: American poets tend to share an ever-present yet often unacknowledged conviction that certain formal operations and strategies are uniquely suited to express American life and that a poet's job is to select the right and proper form. When Cushman first pointed out such "fictions of form" in his study by that title, he did so not to correct them, "not to judge their truth value, not to call them wrong or false," but only to reveal the impact of their guiding force: "the unique ways in which it [American poetry] promotes the significance of its own formation." Yet the "unique ways" that poets have acted out these pervasive fictions are often freighted with judgments of their own; Cushman himself notices how frequently formal convictions surface as pejorative forces, where what *to* do is inherently superior over what *not* to do. It is "the dark side of the American will toward poetic independence," Cushman warns, marked by "Anxiety, compulsion, self-consciousness, desperation, frustration, tension, obsession, fratricidal intensity"—all terms Cushman extracts from earlier studies of US formalisms by Harold Bloom, David Bromwich, Roy Harvey Pearce, Edwin Fussell, John Hollander, and Daniel Hoffman (8). Indeed, binary divisions may allow factions that in turn let poets (and critics) take sides, place blame, and assert superiority.

Desiring to escape models that promote ill will, some critics have been eager to understand contemporary poetry without this narrative of rifts and disagreements. Thus, even as he notes the pervasiveness of many formal divisions, Cushman himself stresses that, for poetry analysis in general, "least useful are those approaches that insist on binary pairings of opposites," because "the differences they identify are superficial and not the differences that make a difference" (13). More recently, when Michael Davidson (2012: 1495) looks toward a more unified future for American poetry, he does so with a decided note of relief: "It seems clear that the emergent poetry of the 21st c[entury] no longer can be described by binaries." Notably, Davidson adds sociopolitical divisions into his assessment of binaries to conclude his thoughts: "Categories of identity seem both limiting and beside the point. The strong lyric tendency of poetry of the 1970s and 1980s is now matched by an equally strong commitment to narrative, prose poetry, performance, and satiric verse. To adapt the title of a recent anthol[ogy], we live in an age of the Am[erican] hybrid, linking formalists and experimentalists, proceduralists and stand-up poets." Surely Davidson's postidentity, nonbinary forecast

was overly optimistic, especially considering the ongoing systems of supremacy that often require us to recognize separate identity categories as an antidote to oppression through invisibility. Indeed, Davidson himself would likely revise his statements from 2012 considering the political realities of the United States now eleven years later, when liberal democracy is threatened anew by rising fascist powers. But more importantly, whether in a present-day or historical context, we should not be so quick to dismiss as superficial the dichotomies and distinctions that emerge among poets and poems, many of which signal complex social and aesthetic positions. Indeed, these categories are useful both for what they reveal about our culture and for how they have spurred many to reach for and imagine particular kinds of writing.

Indeed, Davidson's assessment of contemporary American poetry might stand if paired with a deeper consideration of the endurance of categorical distinctions, both aesthetic and political ones: formal hybridity does indeed pervade contemporary poetry, but these intermixtures do not necessarily erase categories of difference. Instead, employing these distinctions together within a given text is, for many, an opportunity: there is an emergent tendency in contemporary American poetry to accept the poetry-prose binary on its own terms, using apparent aesthetic distinctions to investigate ideological ones—some of which are, these writers suggest, likewise troubled and troubling. Some obvious recent examples include the poetry collections of C. S. Giscombe, Tyehimba Jess, Ilya Kaminsky, Claudia Rankine, Shanxing Wang, and Monica Youn—which all include prose forms among traditional lineated verse forms, generally distinguishable from one another—or novels and essay collections by writers like Henry Gordon Jr., Linda Hogan, Lily Hoang, R. Zamora Lindmarck, and Karen Tei Yamashita, all writers who include lineated verse forms within prose-like texts. Among these, Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) stands out for the ways it has been formally, wholly recognized for its poetry and its prose. Among its many accolades is a nomination for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism, an award typically bestowed on books considered exclusively prose. The book also won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry; it made history as the first book to be a finalist in two categories.

For the purposes of this essay, Rankine's example is also compelling because it dialogues with identity politics, especially pertaining to race, that motivated some nineteenth-century thinkers to entertain the binary back then. *Citizen*, in Kamran Javadzadeh's (2019: 475) apt summary, is about "racism's role in

the circulation of self in contemporary public life,” and it asks us to consider how concepts of whiteness have long supported poets’ formulations of a unified lyric subject. For Rankine in *Citizen*, Javadizadeh tells us, “the poet’s self was thought of not as an internally coherent reservoir of Wordsworthian memory but instead as a linguistically—and therefore, in Rankine’s view, socially and politically—contingent and shifting site” (476). Undergirding its argument about racism’s challenge to unified self-sovereignty, the text is likewise divided, exploring its topic across a variety of formal and generic modes. The book starts with paragraphs in traditional prose forms, which Rankine (2016) refers to as “essays”; these often narrate moments of racist aggression against a Black individual, and they range from brief, single-page stories, to prose-paragraph “scripts” for film productions, to the long-form exposition on Serena Williams that comprises section 2. The text shifts to a poetic mode, something more like lineated poetry stanzas, when it moves away from specific events. Photographs of visual art objects are interspersed throughout both the poetry and prose like a motif uniting the seven sections, one that incorporates other artists’ work.

According to Rankine’s (2016; n.d.) account in interviews, the book was designed not to erase the distinctions between these multiple approaches but to emphasize their differences. Speaking with Sandra Lim (Rankine, n.d.), she invokes Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* as a formal model, “with its poems and prose and portraits.” I have written elsewhere about Lowell’s own oppositional definition of poetry and prose (LeRud 2021: 174–75); he insists on a clear distinction in *Life Studies* between the prose of “91 Revere Street” and the poems that follow.<sup>8</sup> While Rankine’s text directly challenges what seems universalizing in Lowell’s confessional lyric mode, her book is similarly compelled by stark formal differences between its various sections. Indeed, with Rachel Zucker, she called her book “interdisciplinary” (Rankine 2016), explaining that one purpose of her multiform design is to extend the reach and expand the audience for her work by giving readers options:

I’m also interested in, sort of, interdisciplinary approaches to writing and poetry and I think that that is another reason why my recent work has a more general audience because people are given different ways in. To me, all of the things that get included in any given book are essential to the investigation of its subject, but

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8. Lowell stuck to a clear dichotomy even as his nearest poetic influence, Elizabeth Bishop, constructed a similarly multiform text in *Questions of Travel* (1965) and spoke of her hybrid work as “poetic-prose” or prose poetry rather than strictly prose or poetry (Bishop 2011: 90, 95, 113, 291, 431).

it also allows someone who's more comfortable visually to work that way primarily, someone who's more comfortable in terms of text can negotiate the visual that way, somebody who's used to lineation might reside there longer than with the essay, for example, so, you know, I think that helps.

That Rankine imagines her readers will pick and choose between focusing on “visual,” “text,” and “lineation”—by which she means perhaps the art, prose-paragraph essays, and lyrical verse—suggests the extent to which *Citizen* thinks in discernible boundaries among its component parts. Still, Rankine affirms that all pieces of the book are “essential to the investigation of its subject,” part of *Citizen*'s overall investigation into the self-alienating effects of racism. Indeed, if the text's formal multiplicity itself represents something of the disunity Rankine explores, then it also seeks paths between disjuncture. Javadizadeh (2019: 487) calls this Rankine's “open lyric,” a mode of a poetic selfhood that accommodates disconnection without covering over difference. If Rankine's open lyric contests the linguistic formations of white supremacy—especially the mythology of a lyric self who could speak for everyone—it does so by mapping a disconnected self across the divisions of poetry and prose forms, as if working against the catastrophic current of persistent structural racism.

Rankine's example is a reminder to us not to cover over narratives of difference, however flawed they may be, but to endeavor to understand them better and acknowledge their outcomes. Here again, Levine's (2015: 9) words on forms apply more broadly: “Too strong an emphasis on forms' dissolution has prevented us from attending to the complex ways that power operates in a world dense with functioning forms.” Too strong an emphasis on dissolving or disproving any distinction between poetry and prose, we might say, prevents us from attending to their complex history and their persistent currency. Thus, distinguishing types from among bodies of literature is useful not to prescribe what literature should be but to understand what it has been and could be. Jonathan Culler (2015: 44) reminds us to ask “which categories are most useful, most likely to provide insight into the history of the literary tradition and the functioning of literature.” This binary pair is one with much to teach us.

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