

Poetry or Prose: A False Dichotomy

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Michael Clay Thompson

mith@mac.com

Trochee trips from long to short;
From long to long in solemn sort
Slow Spondee stalks, strong foot!, yet ill able
Ever to come up with Dactyl's trisyllable.
Iambics march from short to long.
With a leap and a bound the swift Anapests throng.
One syllable long, with one short at each side,
Amphibrachys hastes with a stately stride —
First and last being long, middle short, Amphimacer
Strikes his thundering hoofs like a proud high-bred Racer.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Metrical Feet—A Lesson for a Boy

In a sense, curriculum means making a bet on what knowledge students actually need in life. Sometimes the bet is wrong. Sometimes essential content is not recognized as essential; it is underestimated and relegated to the sidelines. Sometimes society's values mask the importance of bodies of knowledge. Sometimes the goals of curricula are stymied by assumptions we do not even realize we are making, and students have to face the challenges of life without elements of knowledge that they need.

Intellectual history is replete with examples of false assumptions that blinded scholars for decades or even centuries, only to give way eventually to different paradigms that offered clearer explanations of the truth.

One obvious example of such a false scientific assumption is the traditional Newtonian distinction between matter and empty space. This assumption is natural because it appears to be the reality that is represented to us by our sense perceptions, but ever since Einstein revolutionized physics, scientists have discussed ultimate reality in different terms, replacing the apparent dichotomy between matter and empty space with the unified concept of *space-time*. In the concept of space-time, both matter and empty space are regions in a four-dimensional space-time continuum that unites everything in the universe into one, vast, wheeling geometry of galaxies, stars, planets, people, molecules, atoms, subatomic particles, and energy. The entire universe is one space-time object.

In this immense unity of space-time, we *are* the walrus, and instead of the sun's gravity having to reach supernaturally across 93,000,000 miles of "empty space" to hold the Earth in its orbit, the Earth simply has to roll politely around a circular groove of space- time that rings the sun.

In our nation's typical language arts curricula, we may be operating under such a false assumption—a false dichotomy—that blinds us to vital truths about language and that results in insidious barriers to student learning, particularly when it comes to teaching students how to write or how to read great writing. Like modern physics, modern language arts curricula may be in need of a unified theory that dissolves an outmoded separation assumption and replaces it with a coherent explanation.

This false dichotomy is the distinction between poetry and prose. No single description can accurately represent the views of thousands of teachers or the ideas that

are contained in written curricula, but the stereotypes about poetry and prose might be summarized in this way:

Poetry and prose are not the same; they are different genres of writing. In prose the writer concentrates on the clarity of the sentence and the precision of the diction, and the aesthetic aspect of a prose sentence is in its conciseness and its logic.

In poetry the poet—we will not use the word *writer*—concentrates on the sound of the sentence and its relationship to the beauty of the subject, and the aesthetic aspect of a line of poetry is in the musical qualities of its rhythm and in the sounds of its words.

One underlying principle of these specious stereotypes, for that is what they are, is that prose writers need not fret with the poetics of a prose sentence. The writer of a novel, article, or essay is poetically off-duty and can write with a muffled ear; prose is all about meaning and is not concerned with sound.

A second principle (hideous to say) is that poetry and prose have emotional and possibly sexist stereotypes that interfere with their intellectual truths. Real men, goes the stereotype, write prose; prose is the language of history and other impassive cognitive articulations that address the ugly world in manly words. Poetry has a decidedly feminine stereotype in popular culture. Poetry is thought to be more concerned with emotions, with personal responses, and with beauty. Poems are imagined to be pretty, and to have pretty revelations as their purpose.

Sweet poems are weaker than muscular prose.

The intellectual truth, of course, is that prose and poetry have the same range of content, from ugly to beautiful, from tragic to triumphant, from love to terror. More important for our discussion—to put one piece of the truth in blunt terms—is that many novelists (This is our little secret) also write poems, and they regularly employ their poetic devices in the prose sentences of their novels. Why would they not? So here is the rub: if we do not really know about poetry, we can not really know about prose, either. Think about the implications for language arts curricula.

To be deaf to poetics is not only to be deaf to poetry; it is to be deaf to prose as well. If you can't read Wordsworth, you can't read Jane Austen, either. Furthermore, to be deaf to poetics is to be unaware of the poetic elements of one's own sentences—a poetic aspect that is there, like it or not, and that will be well written or not, like it or not.

From a curricular perspective, to teach great reading or great writing inherently involves teaching great poetics: types of rhyme, assonance, consonance, alliteration, meter, and the array of other details involved in high-level control of language.

Even so, poetry and the array of poetic devices used in poetry wither on the curricular sidelines. Many a student has graduated from high school with no grounding in classical poetics whatsoever. In many an English class, poetry has minimal prominence, and when the class finally reads a poem, the emphasis may be on pseudo-interpretive questions (What do you think the poet meant by this line?), ignoring the powerful poetic techniques of the line.

Why do I use the term *pseudo-interpretive*? I use it because the poetics can be so decisive in confirming an interpretation that it seems foolhardy to pretend to interpret without them. As a quick example, Blake's "Tiger" is written in trochees, the dread

metric feet of evil and villains, which unambiguously identifies Blake's tiger as a terrifying monster, not a cute animal.

Of course, this is all fine talk; it would be more persuasive if we had copious examples of poetic prose to examine. If we were presented with prose sentences using poetic techniques in a manner unquestionably intentional, and from an impressive variety of prose works and authors, we might cast a cold eye (Yeats said that) on curriculum, and rethink what knowledge our students will need. Ergo, let us look at some sentences.

Charlotte Brontë, in her 1847 masterpiece *Jane Eyre*, wrote, "The sternest-seeming stoic is human after all." Look at the brilliant alliteration of *Sternest Seeming Stoic*; it is difficult to imagine a more stoic word than *stoic*, with its tough *st* and concluding *k* sound. Brontë surely began with the adjective *stoic*, and then encased it in words that would amplify it: *STern STOic*, with *Seeming* for good measure. The tough beginning of this sentence contrasts dramatically with its pleasant conclusion of soft consonants: *human after all, HuMaN aFteR aLL*—human sounds for a human thought.

In his 1851 classic *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville wrote, "Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up—leaps thy apotheosis!" We hear the wash of the sea in the *sh* consonance of *oCean-periSHing*, which is followed by a spondee (two stressed syllables in a row, often used to emphasize an idea) *straight up*. The pause before and after the spondee *straight up* doubles its power. Abraham Lincoln, an accomplished poet as a young man, used spondees brilliantly in the Gettysburg Address.

Mark Twain often used poetic touches in his prose, and sometimes he used them intensely. In *Tom Sawyer*, written in 1876, Twain wrote, "The dreadful secret of the

murder was a chronic misery.” Twain made the sentence rich with *r*’s: *dReadful secRet muRdeR chRonic miseRy*. Alliteration is a powerful tool for emphasis, and Twain alliterated *Murder* and *Misery*. Notice the subtle touches in *dREADful secRET*, as well as *seCRet* and *CHRONic*. What Twain accomplished with all of these devices was to give the sentence a richness by surrounding the key words with other words sharing their sounds; he supported *muRDeR* with *DReaDful*, and *MURdER* with *MisERy*. When a word has no echo among its companions, it tends to sink down and lose prominence. These poetic techniques pop the power words out of the line.

Thomas Hardy is known as a great novelist, but he also wrote some of the best poems in English literature. Some feel he was a greater poet than a novelist. In his 1886 novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy wrote, “Thus his jealous soul speciously argued to excuse the separation of father and child.” We hear the hissing evil of the argument in the combined alliteration and consonance of the *s*: *thuS hiS jealouS Soul SpeciouSly eXcuXe Separation*. It sounds like the sibilant screech of a vampire. Notice the assonance of *argUed* and *excUse*. The character’s treachery is condemned by the poetics of the sentence.

In 1895 H.G. Wells used a brilliant metrical device in *The Time Machine*. Wells wrote that “Things will move faster and faster toward the subjugation of Nature.” The *faster and faster* idea of the sentence is amplified by Wells’s use of falling meter. Falling meter is the use of metrical feet that begin with a stressed syllable and end with an unstressed syllable, of which there are two: trochees and dactyls. A trochee is a two-syllable foot that begins with a stress, such as *LIN-coln*. A dactyl is a three-syllable foot that begins with a stress, such as *HAPP-i-ly*. Wells pushed his sentence with falling

meter: *THINGS will move / FAS ter and / FAS ter / TOW ard the / SUB ju / GA tion of / NA ture*. We see dactyl, dactyl, trochee, dactyl, trochee, dactyl, and trochee. Falling meter is not some arcane technical device that most writers do not know about; it is one of the introductory elements of poetics—a standard device. Sylvia Plath used falling meter brilliantly in her poem “The Moon and the Yew Tree”: *THIS is the / LIGHT of the / MIND / COLD and / PLAN e / TAR y*. In addition to giving the sentence a toppling pace, Wells received benefit from the traditional use of falling meter for suggesting danger or evil.

Look at the way Joseph Conrad used meter in this sentence from his 1902 novel *Heart of Darkness*: “I had to watch the steering and circumvent those snags.” The sentence begins with two iambs, *i HAD / to WATCH*, but then shifts to a little known poetic foot, the amphibrach, which is a three-syllable foot in which the middle syllable is stressed, *the STEER ing*, but then for the swirling of circumventing the snags, the sentence reverts to spinning iambs: *and CIR / cum VENT / those SNAGS*. By putting the amphibrach in the center of the sentence, Conrad created a pause that propelled the sentence into its final three iambs. Notice the very strong alliteration of *Steering Circumvent Snags*; we can almost hear the *ssss* of the rapid.

In James M. Barrie’s 1904 novel, *Peter Pan*, we read, “They suddenly saw the perfidious pirates bearing down upon them.” Barrie used alliteration in *Suddenly Saw* and in *Perfidious Pirates*, and he emphasized the pounding *p*’s, *b*’s, and *d*’s to suggest the force of the event: *suDDenly, PerfiDiouS, PiratES, BeariNG, Down, and uPon*. These consonants (PB TD KG) are known as *stopped consonants* because they involve a stopping of the breath, and they are often used in poetry and prose to give the force of

impact to a sentence. Barrie also drummed out the end of the sentence in menacing trochees (A trochee, recall, is a two-syllable poetic foot in which the first syllable is stressed; it is the evil opposite of the sweet iamb, and is often used for villains and danger, e.g. the witches in *Macbeth* with their *DOUB le / DOUB le / TOIL and / TROUB le*): *PI rates / BEAR ing / DOWN u / PON them*. Barrie’s brilliant combination of alliteration, assonance on the heavy consonants, and trochaic meter perfectly complements the meaning of the idea and makes the sentence more powerful than it would be absent the poetics.

In his 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, “Happy vacuous bursts of laughter rose toward the summer sky.” By establishing assonance (the repetition of a vowel sound) on the low *a* vowel in *happy* and *vacuous*, Fitzgerald prepared us to notice *laughter: hAppy vAcuous lAughter*. Then Fitzgerald shifted the sentence to one of the two sounds that Edgar Allan Poe said were the most powerful in English, the *r*: *buRsts laughteR Rose towaRd summerR*. The consonance on the *r* gives the richness of laughter, har har, to the sentence. Notice the subtle similarity of *bURsts laughtER summER*.

In Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, written in 1977, we see this sentence: “He went completely under and got a glimpse of a small, slivery, translucent fish.” First, notice that the sentence is essentially iambic, *he WENT / com PLETE / ly UN*, but when it gets to the wiggly fish, it changes to a wiggly anapest, *der and GOT*, then back to an iamb, *a GLIMPSE*, and then back to another anapest, *of a SMALL*. All of these feet end in stressed syllables, so we would say that they are in a *rising* meter. The sentence ends in the dactyl *SIL ver y* and two iambs *trans LU / cent FISH*. In other words the metrical

matrix of the line is iambic, but Morrison wiggled the meter in the fish part; the meter is as descriptive as the words are. Beyond the meter we notice that early in the sentence there is rough *g* alliteration in *Got Glimpse*, but the consonants shift to slippery *s*'s to describe the *Small Silvery tranSluCent* fish.

There are hundreds of these examples of prose sentences that incorporate poetic techniques, and it would be easy to continue with dozens more in this article, but the point is made. Great prose writers tend, profoundly, to be both readers and writers of poetry as well, and they consistently employ poetic device in the sentences of their novels.

What we see in the examples above should not surprise us, even though it may. It should not surprise us that an alpha-talent of language who has devoted his or her entire life to writing would be more aware of the most elementary components of language such as vowels, consonants, silences, and stresses, than a person of ordinary language talent or slight language interest. That Jane Austen used vowels and consonants to paint sounds into her sentences is only surprising if we have unknowingly assumed that a literary genius's language mind is no more language-aware than anyone else's—a patent absurdity. Such writers, even they are writing what we think of as prose, may be doing things in their sentences that will be missing from our curricula if we persist in looking only at the prose side of prose. If we open our minds to a full view of a great novelist's sentence, we may find, like Balboa, that there is an unknown world on the back of the sentence.

Think about it: most outstanding published novelists are incapable of writing a classic. A Dickens is as rare as a Shelley, an Austen is as remarkable as a Yeats. When we read the sentences of such writers, whether they were writing in what we call *poetry* or what we call *prose*, we should allow ourselves to be illuminated by the creative power of someone who has taken language far, far beyond all normal assumptions.

The implications for language arts curricula are profound. We must include the formal study of poetics as one of the core components of language arts. Students must be

taught to avoid thinking about poetics only when they are studying a poem, and to be poetics-aware while reading great prose. Finally, using the sentences of great novelists as their models, students can begin to experiment with poetic devices such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, and meter not only in their own poems but in their own prose sentences. We would not expect every prose sentence to be written in full poetic regalia, but we want students to have poetic techniques at their command when the content is appropriate.

References

All of the examples in this book were taken from *4Practice 2*, listed below, but the concepts and poetic terms are a result of the work done for my poetics textbook series.

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