

# THE YELLOWED PAGE

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## POETRY AND PROSE

### THE THIRD LECTURE FROM JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY'S: “THE PROBLEM OF STYLE”

Comments by Ferrick Gray

## Prefatory Remarks

Much of this essay has appeared in “**Tradition: What Happened to Poetry?**”, but it is included here with some minor additions for the completion of the summaries for Murry’s lectures delivered at Oxford in 1921. A lot of what Murry has to say is still relevant today, over one hundred years later. In many ways, it appears that the progress of poetry has not changed. Even today, its appeal is minimal, and it is not well received by the public, more so for formal poetry. However, some consider *vers libre* the savior of poetry, but it is far from this even though it is more popular.

What we can say is that poetry has fallen into the abyss, and it will be a long time, if ever, that it will claw its way out and achieve the position it once held in literature.

## The Original Conception

In his first lecture, Murry’s original conception was:

The test of a true individuality of style is that we should feel it to be inevitable; in it we should be able to catch the reference back to a whole mode of experience that is consistent with itself. If this reference is perceptible to us, it will be accompanied by a conviction that the peculiarity of style was necessary, and that the originating emotion of which we are sensible demanded this method of expression and this alone.

Basically, he is saying that the form used to express the emotion or thought was the best one to employ to give full meaning for what had been written. In this lecture, he considers the familiar distinction between **poetry and prose**, taking this notion into consideration. The purpose of this lecture is to investigate the possibilities of any further indicators that may be helpful in defining style and to bring this somewhat abstract concept to a position where it is more easily understood.

# Poetry and Prose

It may be that the abstract nature of Murry's original conception is not easily understood, and he does admit that in its current form it would indicate that there is very little or no difference between poetry and prose. However, we do know there is a difference. In some cases, the line between the two can be cleverly blurred, but generally the two are quite distinct. The question is: Why and how do they differ?<sup>1</sup>

The form we choose depends on which is the best way to express ourselves. This may not seem to be a difficult task, but it does happen where what *was* poetry *should have been* prose and vice versa. As to what helps us to decide depends on several factors. Murry refers to what he calls the **fashion of the age** as being the most important.

In the Elizabethan age the **fashion of the age** was drama, whereas in the nineteenth century it became the novel. At different times, artistic and literary forms imposed themselves for varied reasons making some more common or acceptable than others. It may seem odd to say that an artistic or literary form imposed itself on a writer, but the result was much how this appeared.

## Embracing the “Fashion of the Age”

Many new and seasoned writers were forced in some way to embrace the **fashion of the age**. Reasons such as:

- They relied on writing to make a living.
- The popular or accepted form reached the largest possible audience.

Added to this were economic and social conditions which in most ways encapsulate the above.

At this time English poetry failed in its attempt to discover a poetic form natural to the age. Writers such as Hardy<sup>2</sup> and Gissing<sup>3</sup> reluctantly adopted the novel form even though it was the poetry they preferred. Simply put, poetry did not pay.

It was not the case that excellent poetry was not produced, the fact was that poetry had never really changed for over a century. For the most part, the general reader's appetite in literature has changed.

## Inability to accept the “Fashion of the Age”

If or when a writer cannot accept the form that is vital for their own time, they endeavor to make their own mark. However, they would find the task of making *their* form acceptable or imposing it on contemporary taste impossible.

Whereas theater continued with reasonable strength and success, poetry suffered greatly and was basically dead. This was in the nineteenth century, but there is little, if any, difference now in the twenty-first century. The possibilities for poetry were equally great, but it suffered from not having popular taste due to its lack in development of more creative structures.

What we find now is that even a poor novel will be successfully published alongside a good novel, but good or original poetry will not be recognized because it does not appeal to the consciousness at

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<sup>1</sup> “Where the boundary between prose and poetry lies, I shall never be able to understand. The question is raised in manuals of style, yet the answer to it lies beyond me. Poetry is verse: prose is not verse. Or else poetry is everything with the exception of business documents and school books.” *Diary of Tolstoy*; Dutton, p. 84

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hardy (June 2, 1840—January 11, 1928) English novelist and poet.

<sup>3</sup> George Gissing (November 22, 1857—December 28, 1903) English novelist.

different levels of education that the novel is capable of and does. Poetry has no equivalent form since poetic drama has suffered and decayed from lack of creativity.

It is possible that some poetry would be better as prose and vice versa, the result would be a very different work and so too the appeal to the public. At times writers will force their work to suit the **fashion of the age** to capture a greater audience, but when the incorrect form has been chosen or forced, the only outcome is failure.

## Emotion and Accuracy

In general, it does not matter a great deal if poetry or prose is used. It may be accidental or sit with the fashion of the age. However, when what is written is *emotionally intense* or *personal* the choice is more likely poetry. As examples, Murry says:

I cannot conceive Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in prose; but I can quite easily conceive some of his plays as novels—I can even imagine that *Hamlet* might have been more completely successful as a novel.

He continues:

Moreover, there is the obvious objection that it neglects the concrete individuality of works of literature. They are what they are, and to imagine them otherwise is to strive after a vain thing: *Hamlet* as a novel would simply not be *Hamlet*. I admit it freely. I am merely suggesting that a quite different *Hamlet* might, as a matter of fact, have given a more completely adequate expression to the emotional content of Shakespeare's mind.

Poetry was the original form of literature, and it was prose that developed later. The main reason for its development was that some content would suffer greatly when written in metrical form. It was found that the metrical form could not always follow with the proper exactness when requiring logical thought. Regardless of the metrical form, exactness is not possible.

Prose developed rapidly in the areas of science, philosophy and law and became the popular vehicle for argument. However, in Elizabethan times **blank verse** was still preferred. This had some advantages over rhymed verse and to an extent improved the ability to express thoughts clearly, but it did not always avoid paraphrasing and circumlocution which both hindered accuracy. Yet we find that not all prose is equal. Here Murry mentions the Authorized Version<sup>4</sup> of the Bible, Milton<sup>5</sup> and Browne<sup>6</sup>, but we must also note the period of his references; all in the seventeenth century.

This was a very different prose. You would say this is *poetic prose*<sup>7</sup>.

It is prose that has glorious qualities that are not essential to prose, and has not other less striking qualities which *are* the specific qualities of prose; it has not that absolute precision of statement which is the mark of excellent prose; it has not the flexible, non-insistent rhythm that is proper to prose in the pink of condition; it has not the lithe glancing movement, swiftly and secretly advancing which is characteristic of prose. It was not until the novel had become firmly established in England that prose could freely develop into a perfect instrument for creative art.

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<sup>4</sup> Referring to the King James Bible, its first complete publication in 1611.

<sup>5</sup> John Milton (December 9, 1608—November 8, 1674) English poet, polemicist (engaged in controversial debate), and civil servant.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Thomas Browne (October 19, 1605—October 19, 1682) English polymath (knowledge spans many different subjects).

<sup>7</sup> Not to be confused with the misnomer *prose poetry*.

This was a very different *type* of prose. It still contained a poetic nature but was more fluid in its construction. We could see this as a slow move from the Elizabethan blank verse to a more accurate form of communication.

Regardless, there are subjects for which meter, rime and rhythm cannot be used such as logic or science. Prose for such subjects or content is the language of exact thinking and exact description. Thus, it makes sense that poetry and prose are not always interchangeable. It is possible, but the content must be suitable.

## Choosing: Poetry or Prose?

Murry gives as his example of choosing the wrong form as Massinger<sup>8</sup>.

Massinger spent most of his life writing tragedies, for the simple reason that his abilities as a writer were real and tragedy was the fashion. But he was far indeed from having that peculiar sense of the quality of life which makes tragedy a natural expression; his conception of tragedy is utterly artificial; his hero, for example, in *The Virgin Martyr*, is inhumanly and impossibly good. He could work out a tragedy, but he could not conceive one.

This is much the case today when people attempt to write in genres that they are not suited. When this occurs, it is often an attempt to satisfy the taste of the current type of reader. In other words, writing for a specific audience or for a particular reason, much like a poet laureate.

Massinger's talent laid more in his achievement in comedy. In this genre, this was his obvious form of expression and talent that *the age* could give. So, we find that how and what he wrote did not suit him and that his actual talent was for prose comedy, not tragedy. As such, we can see how a writer may struggle between *what* they should write, *how* they should write and for *what* reason.

## Something In-between?

There is no doubt that there are different *categories* of prose. Categories may not be the best descriptor but demonstrates that all prose is not equal. We may at times think we have the dilemma in that we cannot clearly determine if a passage is poetry or prose. The dilemma is merely an illusion because we can have *poetic prose*, but we cannot have *prose poetry*, no matter what is said about it.

Murry reminds us that it was once thought that the more poetic prose was, the finer it was:

But the heresy that the more poetic prose is, the finer it is, is widespread; it should be deplored and combated, not only because it is a vice of taste, but because in practice there is nothing more dangerous to the formation of a prose style than the endeavour to make it poetic.

We see this problem, or confusion today in what is purported to be *vers libre*. We find, if written well, a form of poetic prose, but it is not poetry. It is this statement that will solicit objections. Fine prose is not necessarily poetic and nor does it necessarily appeal directly to the emotions by image or rhythm. It may do so, but these qualities do not make it a poem.

## Final Words

At this point in the lectures some headway has been made, and differences have been identified. Now he continues to follow up his ideas in his next lecture **The Central Problem of Style**.

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<sup>8</sup> Philip Massinger (1582—March 17, 1640) English dramatist.