Blurry border between prose and poetry



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WHAT is the difference between prose and poetry? It apparently seems to be a trite question, but in fact it is not. It is a question of extremely serious sort as there is real difficulty in distinguishing between the two literary genres. The problem has bugged literature for over a century and triggered acute debate among the literary circles. What has transpired from the long debate is that there is no clear-cut border between prose and poetry, whose characteristics overlap to a great extent. That means there are no exact definitions by means of which they can be properly identified and distinguished. We may first examine, with traditionality, the characteristics of both prose and poetry and then consider how they overlap.

The main characteristics of prose would be: 1. sentences run on page without break; 2. sentences are grouped in paragraph; 3. sentences are constructed according to grammatical rules; 4. sentences and paragraphs are logically connected; 5. meaning is usually literal and well-comprehensible; 6. sentences are not patterned in meter; and 7. line- or sentence-ending words do not necessarily rhyme.

On the other hand, the main characteristics of poetry would be: 1. sentences are broken on page; 2. sentences may be grouped in stanza; 3. sentences are choppy and not often strictly grammatical; 4. sentences may not be logically connected; 5. meaning is often metaphorical and ambiguous; 6. sentences are often patterned in meter; and 7. line- or sentence-ending words often rhyme.

Now we can compare the characteristics of the two genres. Number one is the graphemic characteristic, an important formal aspect. We should be able to identify prose or poetry just looking at the page on which it appears. If the sentences of a text run up to the border of a page and then drop down to the following lines and go on and on till the end, it is prose. In printing parlance, we term the lines justified. If the sentences break in the middle for stylistic requirement as per the wish of the poet and fail to reach the border, it is a poem. The lines here are usually aligned left and may be indented in a patterned way. Line arrangement gets special attention in concrete poetry.

Now, the question: does the rule of line arrangement hold for prose and poetry strictly? Not at all, at least to a number of nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century poets and critics. According to them, line arrangement is a defining characteristic neither for prose nor poetry. So there is no harm in arranging the sentences in what is conventionally known as prose form. Henceforth poetry follows a prose course. Can you think of its consequence? If the line-break rule is violated, the border between prose and poetry becomes blurred, with neutralisation of the graphemic difference. As a result, a reader can no longer identify category looking at the page instantly. Clueless, he/she has to go inside, the