picture of which is however no less nebulous than that of outside. It is an embarrassment for the reader.

Presenting poetry in the garb of prose -- this is what has happened in the last one and a half centuries of literary practice. The experiment started with the French poets Aloysius Bertrand and Charles Baudelaire, who first struck hammer on the border. They wrote poetry which apparently looked like prose due to the absence of line-break. Critics later labelled it as "Prose poetry". Here is an example of this kind ("Be Drunk", Charles Baudelaire, translated by Louis Simpson):

"You have to be always drunk. That's all there is to itit's the only way. So as not to feel the horrible burden of time that breaks your back and bends you to the earth, you have to be continually drunk.

But on what? Wine, poetry or virtue, as you wish. But be drunk.

And if sometimes, on the steps of a palace or the green grass of a ditch, in the mournful solitude of your room, you wake again, drunkenness already diminishing or gone, ask the wind, the wave, the star, the bird, the clock, everything that is flying, everything that is groaning, everything that is rolling, everything that is singing, everything that is speaking. . .ask what time it is and wind, wave, star, bird, clock will answer you: "It is time to be drunk! So as not to be the martyred slaves of time, be drunk, be continually drunk! On wine, on poetry or on virtue as you wish.""

The poetic manifesto of Bertrand and Baudelaire gradually spread to other countries. It was pursued by Maria Rilke and Franz Kafka in Germany, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz in Latin America, and William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein in the United States. Many other poets also followed on the US soil. Among them, the most important are James Wright, Russel Edson, John Ashbery, Lyn Hejinian, Charles Simic and James Tate. Nowadays it is a fashion for many young poets.

Let us have a look at the other apparently distinguishing factors of the two genres. We consider them from the perspective of poetry. The second characteristic of poetry stanza -- may vanish immediately after withdrawing the border. It is the corollary of the relaxation of the first criterion of poetry; the stanzas are automatically transformed into paragraphs.

The third characteristic of poetry -- choppiness of sentences -- is the poet's choice. He/she may choose to write in full sentences just like prose. None can prevent him/her from doing so. The fourth characteristic of poetry -- weak logical connection of sentences -- is also optional. If the poet decides to put the sentences in strong logic, nobody is going to object to it. In literary history, the metaphysical poets and Augustans are famous for their application of logic to poetry.

The fifth characteristic of poetry -- metaphorical and ambiguous meaning, connected to complexity of language -- is often considered central to poetry. But it is not so in all cases. Many poems are written in plain and unambiguous language. They are as transparent as sunlight. On the contrary, many prose writings are complicated and incomprehensible, particularly of the philosophical type.

The sixth and seventh characteristics of poetry -- meter and rhyme -- are considered archaic nowadays. They are avoided by many poets without hesitation. Having produced poetic lines without meter and rhyme, they are confident that the products hold full poetic appeal. They call it 'free verse', opposed to all kinds of form.

Form-free movement has deformed the face of poetry for over a century, with a debilitating effect. At last, prose poetry drove the last nail in the coffin.

Now it should be clear why any attempt at defining prose and poetry should fail. It is very unfortunate indeed. The advancement of any branch of science and art depends on how rigorously a set of rules can be applied to it. In the last couple of centuries, the branches of knowledge which formulated tighter rules and applied them effectively made tremendous progress. But the trend was opposite in the case of poetry. This branch of art loosened whatever rules it had in enforcement. In the early twentieth century Ezra Pound led the rule-breakers in the name of modernism. He destroyed the poetic norms promising new forms, which proved only chaos in the long run. Being a guru, he misled the poetic movement. Throughout the twentieth century, poetry was guided by individual whims rather than logical rules.

The situation now has deteriorated to such an extent that nobody can say with an iota of certainty the text being read is prose or poetry. If the lines of a piece of writing are broken randomly across page and placed as an instance of poetry, nobody can protest. By the same token, if the lines of a poem are kept unbroken on page and placed as an instance of prose, it is bound to be so. Consequently, a shopping list is a sure poem. Any haphazard collection of words is a poem if it is claimed to be so. This only causes a misunderstanding between the writer and the reader, undermining the sanctity of art.

Defining poetry is the most difficulty task now due to the lack of definitive criteria. Poetry has been so liquefied that it has virtually become a formless object. In the course it has slipped into a sticky quagmire of deep dubiousness. Poetry has been totally dissociated from popular reading. It is only meant for the pretentious intellectual scruples in literature departments or it is thrust upon the reluctant readers. A futile academic exercise, isn't it?

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