

THE PROSAICS OF THE ANCIENT NOVELS

The title of this paper requires some immediate explanation, for it includes a neologism and an oxymoron. The term “prosaics,” modeled on the word “poetics,” suggests a study of prose as poetics is the study of poetry. What that involves will be detailed below, particularly in relation to the oxymoron in my title, the ancient novels, the Greek prose narratives of love and adventure produced in the late Hellenistic and imperial period, of which five complete examples are extant.¹ The fact that these eccentric texts are given a name by scholars that is an oxymoron, or at least an anachronism, is symptomatic of their peculiar position in ancient literary history. To call these works “ancient novels” or “ancient romances” is to name them as inchoate or unformed versions of later literary types, and this practice is only one version of a more general tendency to deny these works any “proper” place in literary history. Indeed, Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that the novel has by definition no proper place among the family of traditional genres:

In certain eras—the Greek classical period, the Golden Age of Roman literature, the neo-classical period—all genres in “high” literature (that is, the literature of the ruling social groups)

¹The five extant novels are Chariton of Aphrodisias, Chaereas and Callirhoe (Molinié.1979); Xenophon of Ephesus, An Ephesian Tale (Dalmeyda.1926); Achilles Tatius, Leucippe and Clitophon (Gaselle.1969); Longus, Daphnis and Chloe (Edmonds.1916). Heliodorus of Emessa, An Ethiopian Tale (Rattenbury.1935). These texts, along with a number of fragments, are translated in Reardon.1989. Petronius’s Satyricon and Apuleius’s The Golden Ass are Roman examples often treated with the Greek ones. Brief, useful surveys of the works and their criticism can be found in Sienkewicz.1984 and Bowie.1985.

harmoniously reinforce each other to a significant extent; the whole of literature, conceived as a totality of genres, becomes an organic unity of the highest order. But it is characteristic of the novel that it never enters into this whole, it does not participate in any harmony of the genres.²

The ancient novel seems to play the role of a pharmakos that critics often expel and denigrate in order to make whole the classical system of literary types. This expulsion takes different forms and before turning to a discussion of prosaics and the novel, I would like to review briefly some discussions of the origin and social function of the ancient novels. Even though some of them are old-fashioned and are often openly hostile to the ancient novel, these critical discussions always have their truth; and one task we will set for the prosaics to be discussed later will be to account for these critical assertions in some other way.

The Ancient Novels and their Critics

One frequent kind of description of the origin of the ancient novel speaks in the language of inheritance and legitimacy. In this scheme of things the novel is a sort of bastard produced by the unholy union of two or more other “legitimate” types of literary production. Thus Erwin Rohde argues that the Greek novel is a combination of the erotic narratives of the Hellenistic poets and the fantastic travel literature popularized in the Hellenistic orient.³ Eduard Schwartz asserts that it is the degradation of Hellenistic

²Bakhtin.1981.4

³Rohde.1900

historiography by the seduction of Hellenistic erotic poetry which produces the novel.⁴ Ben Perry sees drama and history as the two key parental forms: drama providing the internal form, history the external.⁵ Bruno Lavagnini speculates that local legends of the Hellenistic era grow into a short story form that then sets up a ménage a trois with new comedy and satire.⁶ Graham Anderson, finally, argued in one of his earlier works, that new comedy was the key ancestor, mating with history (Chariton), or pastoral (Longus), or rhetoric (Achilles Tatius).⁷

Such accounts are typical of that sort of literary history in which literary types are thought of as making up an autonomous system susceptible to a “special history,” usually in terms of a genealogical model according to which those types are arranged into a family tree. Such a scheme has numerous problems,⁸ but for our purposes it is sufficient to note that where literature is seen as a group of relatives having family resemblances and traits that betray their ancestry, the novel comes to indicate some sort of disruption of proper family and sexual politics (something, incidentally, that the novels themselves often thematize). Even attempts to characterize the five extant novels as belonging to the same “family” is not at all easy; and frequently critics who are trying to pinpoint the essence of

⁴Schwartz.1943

⁵Perry.1967. Although he eschews genealogical models to account for the origin of the novel, he argues that this combination of form and content would have represented the ancients’ own reception of the novels.

⁶Lavagnini.1984.

⁷Anderson.1982. Anderson takes a different approach in his more recent work. See below.

⁸Jauss.1982 is still the best discussion of the problems of “special histories.” With special reference to the novel, see Kuch.1985.

the novel genre will tend to exclude one of the extant works in order to make the similarity of the others stick. When Anderson foregrounds the comic aspects of the novel tradition in the work mentioned above, Xenophon is an aberration. Merkelbach's theory that the novels are mystery texts (see below) had to exclude Chariton. The emphasis on travel literature or history makes Longus the odd man out. Perry, on the other hand, sees Chariton as the single extant example of the ideal romance (it is "Greek romance as it should be written"⁹) while the others impose various alien literary or ideological interests on that simple form. In each case, the whole notion of a family of literary types specified on the basis of formal characteristics runs into big trouble with the ancient novels.

Another way of talking about the novels is to call them a decadent form of something else. Thus M. Braun argues that the novels are the result of the degeneration of historiography.¹⁰ G. Giangrande suggests that the novel took its origin from the rhetorical practice of paraphrasing elegies and that they are thus basically a degraded, popularized form of Hellenistic elegy.¹¹ Ben Perry considers the epic and romance to be basically the same genre, the latter a version of the former which is more "externalized, mechanized, sensationalized, and impoverished, as regards its moral and aesthetic quality."¹² In another work, G. Anderson has argued that the novels are aestheticized or secularized versions of oriental religious tales, and that their peculiarity is to be attributed to the

⁹Perry.1967.129.

¹⁰Braun.1938. The same point is made by Schwartz.1943 and Schmeling.1974.

¹¹Giangrande.1962.

¹²Perry.1967.47

subordination of basically religious plots to the individual aesthetic designs of each of the novelists.¹³ In these cases, the novels are seen as merely prosaic versions of verse forms, or as sentimental, romantic versions of prose forerunners. It can be seen that this is not so different from the bastard theory, except that now words like "senility" and "passivity" enter the discussion, usually applied to the authors themselves or the period as a whole. The novel then takes its place alongside closet drama and pantomime as indicators of the spiritual exhaustion of the imperial period.¹⁴ The novels are here seen as being the result of a process of entropy and loss of form. They are amorphous or debased versions of some more poetic forerunner.

Critics who seek a more direct relationship between social factors and the origin of the novels usually keep the idea that they represent some sort of breakdown or attenuation of form. Moses Hadas argues that the origin of the novel is to be found in the literature produced for the preservation of local traditions from the homogenizing influences of Hellenistic culture.¹⁵ Prose narratives meant to give wider circulation to exotic local customs and traditions give way in time to more sensationalized stories focused primarily around erotic themes in faraway places. R. Merkelbach's claim that the novels are mystery texts, providing an allegory for the journey of the initiate in his quest for unity with the divinity, does manage to assign the novels a formal specificity.¹⁶ But this explanation itself

¹³Anderson.1984. Cf. Barns.1956 and West.1974.

¹⁴See van Groningen.1965, Wolf.1912, Altheim.1951 and Phillimore.1912.

¹⁵Hadas.1952. Cf. West.1974 and Levin.1977.

¹⁶Merkelbach.1962.

seems to grow out of a sense of the peculiarity of these texts from the point of view of any ordinary communicative decorum or protocol: it is always tempting to claim that some object or text is religious precisely because it is otherwise incomprehensible. Another claim that surfaces in many discussions of the novel is that they are examples of trashy entertainment for purportedly marginal reading publics, like youth, or women, or for a sentimental bourgeoisie.¹⁷ This is sometimes linked to the claim that the novels are a form of “popular literature” or “mass culture,” a highly unlikely notion in antiquity from a technological standpoint.¹⁸ The idea here is that this “alien” literature must be called into existence by the rise of such “alienated” groups of readers.

All of these critical ideas, whatever their validity and plausibility, relegate the novel to the margins of literary history, or associate them with those margins in some way or other. But notions like “center” and “periphery” are obviously relative terms. That the ancient novels are debased or illegitimate is clearly an idea that emerges from the canons of decorum of the poetic traditions of ancient literature. The novels are amorphous precisely in comparison to the verse genres from which they are taken to be derived by a diminution of form. But this idea is highly suspect and relies in part on an equally suspicious notion about the relationship between verse and prose in general: namely, that prose is the amorphous stuff out of which verse is made by the addition of form,

¹⁷Gual.1979; Hägg.1983; Perry.1967; Schmeling.1980.

¹⁸On the limited circulation of works in writing throughout antiquity and the paucity of potential readers, see Harris.1989. Against the “popularity” of the novels, see Tatum.1990.148-51 and Reeve.1971.

or that prose is the result of the subtraction of form from verse. I would like to begin a reexamination of the ancient novel and its place in literary history by examining the relationship of prose and verse in antiquity. Then it will be possible to return to the critical assertions outlined above and reparse them from the perspective of the novels themselves.

The Question of Prose

In their book on the emergence of prose in the middle ages, Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay argue that we don't really know what prose is.¹⁹ Our common sense notion of prose as "not-verse" is, upon inspection, not only inadequate, but papers over a whole set of important contradictory ideas about language. For example, we usually think of prose as ordinary language, the stuff out of which poetry is made by the addition of form. If prose has form, it is only insofar as characteristics of verse are added to it: "poetic prose," as we sometimes say. This account, however, reverses the actual historical relationship, in which verse forms are generally earlier, as is the case in the middle ages and in Greece, and prose is a later phenomenon, a phenomenon often linked to the introduction of writing, but in any case involving the establishment of a new signifying practice, which in time edges out verse forms as the appropriate medium for significant communication. Yet despite its link to writing, prose is also commonly equated with "speech," insofar as speech is "ordinary" or "neutral" language, as opposed to

¹⁹Godzich and Kittay. 1987.

the elaboration we ascribe to verse.²⁰ For this reason, Godzich and Kittay point out, we do not know how to answer Moliere's Monsieur Jourdain when he congratulates himself for having spoken prose all his life without even knowing it.

Literary critics are by now accustomed to being wary of ascriptions of neutrality or ordinariness to any cultural practice. Such ascriptions usually belie an enormous amount of cultural energy expended to give the appearance of neutrality and ordinariness to something that is constructed and ideologically charged. Indeed, Godzich and Kittay show that prose cannot possibly be what it is often defined as: language minus rhythm and music, or the unelaborated stuff out of which verse is made. Rather, prose must be thought of as a signifying practice that arises to challenge another older signifying practice organized around the presence and activity of a performer: the signifying practice of the bard or the rhapsode, whose performance embodied an oral, and hence memorized and hence versified discourse. The rise of prose implies an attack on the system of oral transmission and performance. And indeed, the prose traditions of Greece often contain explicit critiques of aspects of the oral tradition. Herodotus and Thucydides, for example, make the claim—characteristic of history—that witnesses provide a better basis for truth than the inspired memory of oral

²⁰See, for example, the account of Nagy.1990.30-47, in whose historical scheme prose is the result of a progressive subtraction of characteristics. First there is an opposition between SONG vs. speech, the former an ensemble of characteristics of melody, rhythm and words. From this more primitive ensemble by a process of specialization and divergence, evolves a variety of song types (ᾠδαί) vs. poetry, recited words with reduced or no melody. Finally, poetry itself differentiates into poetry types (with meter) and prose, which is poetry with reduced rhythm and, simultaneously, an imitation of speech.

performers.²¹ In dismissing oral tradition as “hearsay,” Thucydides specifies that the performative context itself compromises the arduous search for truth on which he himself embarks:

Men accept uncritically hearsay (ἀκοὰς) of former events.... So averse to taking pains are most men in the search for truth, and so prone are they to rely on tradition (ἐπὶ τὰ ἑτοῖμα τρέπονται).... [Thucydides’s account is more accurate than] what the poets sing (ὑμνήκασι), who adorn and amplify their theme, and more accurate than what storytellers (λογογράφοι) compose, who aim to please their audience (ἐπὶ τὸ προσαγωγότερον τῆ ἀκροάσει) rather than to be true.²²

This can be compared to Plato’s opposition of true philosophers to “lovers of spectacles” and “lovers of sounds” (φιλοθεάμενοι, φιλοήκοοι).²³ Eric Havelock’s argument that Plato specifically critiques the performative context of Homeric discourse by broadening the definition of mimesis to encompass the entire experience of a performance is well known.²⁴ At the same time, the examples of Thucydides and Plato, who both incorporate “set speeches” into their works, show the complexity and unevenness of the evolution from verse to prose.

²¹For the importance of autopsy in Herodotus, see Hunter.1982.50-67.

²²Thucydides Hist. 1. 20-21 (my translation). λογογράφοι is usually translated as “prose-writers,” and thought to refer to earlier historians, which may be true. But the context links λογογράφοι with poets in that the production and circulation of both are performed. Cf. also the end of Hist. 1. 22: “My history is a possession for all time, not a competitive performance to be heard on some particular occasion (ἀγωνίσμα ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα ἀκούειν).”

²³Rep. 475d-476b. My thanks to Peter Rose for bringing this passage to my attention.

²⁴Havelock.1963.

In the context of the French middle ages, the main provenance of the work of Godzich and Kittay, prose practices evolve to replace the discredited oral traditions of the jongleurs, while simultaneously becoming a secular alternative to Latin, the language of the Church. Prose is thus bound up with a whole revolution of social relationships that has to do with the rise of nation states, historical consciousness, educational institutions and the creation of “literature” as an aesthetic category. The context of the interaction of prose and verse is different in antiquity, but one parallel is absolutely essential. The rise of prose is not merely the subtraction of certain features from versified discourse, but rather the growth of a new signifying practice that adds something and must be understood in terms of how these new features both take the place of the functions once assumed by the performer in an oral tradition, and include other functions not possible in performance at all. At the same time, we can also be confident that the shift from one signifying practice to another will not be merely a formal affair, but will also be intimately connected with the growth and transformation of institutions and changes in social relations.²⁵

The interaction of prose and verse can be compared to the use of writing to record the oral tradition. Whereas an oral performance is organized around the physical presence of the performer and presumes his activity to anchor the presentation, a written down version of what the performer says is a virtuality, like a musical score, which a performer can actualize. A reader who has

²⁵Emphasis is placed on the the socio-political context of the Greek novel by Bowie.1970, Reardon.1974, Kuch.1985 and Holzberg.1986.

experienced performances and knows how they work can also actualize such a virtuality, reconstruct in his or her mind how a performer would probably act while speaking these words. Eventually, however, it is read by those who have never seen a performance and are unfamiliar with its protocols.²⁶ This latter stage is signaled in antiquity by the growth of a body of supplemental material—scholia—that tries to reconstruct the lost dimension of the rhapsode’s signifying practice, beginning with information on how to pronounce the words properly and the elaboration of a scheme of written marks that aid in the recomposition of the lost “voice” of the performer. Equally important is the evolution of a tradition of explanations of expressions and situations that now appear to be lacking something: in the absence of a performer to augment the verbal part of the performance with gestures, changes in intonation, and other forms of physical communication, the text seems brutally paratactic and in need of some exegetical supplement.

Prose can be thought of in a preliminary manner as another way of handling the loss of a performer. Instead of a separate exegetical supplement appended to a text, prose weaves these two parts together into a single discursive whole. Prose is thus a practice in which the verbal dimension carries the entire burden of making the discourse comprehensible. Prose resembles written-down verse in the sense that they are both examples of “disembodied” discourse. However, unlike written-down verse, prose adds something to make

²⁶Godzich and Kittay.1987.15.

up for the loss of the performer, whereas in written-down verse the body of the performer and its interpretive activity are just absent.

In a famous passage of the Phaedrus, Socrates complains that a written speech cannot enter into a dialogue with a reader, but can only repeat the same words over and over (275d-e):

“You might suppose that they [written words] understand what they are saying, but if you ask them what they mean by anything they simply return the same answer over and over again. Besides, once a thing is committed to writing it circulates equally among those who understand the subject and those who have no business with it; a writing cannot distinguish between suitable and unsuitable readers. And if it is ill-treated or unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its rescue; it is quite incapable of defending or helping itself.”

The complaint of Socrates can be leveled especially at what I have been calling written-down verse: it is a performed discourse bereft of its “parent”—the performer—in being written down. It is an abstraction of the verbal dimension out of a more complex signifying practice. One of the tasks facing prose will be to evolve ways to become a better “interlocutor” with its readers, to create ways to anticipate questions and provide answers for them. Just as written-down verse transfers more of the burden of interpretation onto the reader—whose “literacy” will entail nothing less than being able to actualize the virtuality that the written text is—so too, prose, a discourse no longer organized around the interpretive activity of a performer, will have to be organized around the interpretive activity

of a reader/audience, whose “literacy” will consist not in simply supplying from memory a performative dimension, but in making sense out of a discourse that never was—and was never meant to be—performed.

Like writing, at the same time, prose will have to face up to the latent anarchy to which Socrates refers, which coincides with a greater reliance on the “reader” than on a performer. Whereas no discourse, performed or written, can be free of multiple and contradictory interpretations by different audiences, prose has a more “post-lapsarian” consciousness that will take as given the heterogeneity of its potential audience, whereas written-down verse does not yet have the resources to address this problem at all. This is not to say that versified words cannot be made to address this problem (and in fact Godzich and Kittay note that eventually we must begin to distinguish between pre-prose verse and post-prose verse); rather the point is that prose must address it.

The conception of prose articulated by Godzich and Kittay wreaks havoc with some of our common sense ideas about prose in antiquity. For example, Socrates is not speaking, in the Phaedrus, of written-down verse, but of a written-down speech of Lysias, a logos, a word normally translated in such contexts as “prose.” If prose is thought of as “non-verse,” prose in antiquity is primarily such speeches, usually performed dramatically before an audience in a highly specified context. If, however, prose is defined as a discourse not grounded in the activity of a performer, then speeches delivered in courts, assemblies or festivals are closer to the protocols of verse. The physical presence of the orator, his gestures and intonations, will

be an essential part of the signifying practice, just as in the case of the rhapsode.²⁷ Rhetoric even has a mnemonic technology, as well as many of the formal characteristics of verse, such as assonance and rhythm, so that it is a general principle in antiquity that good logos should be verse-like, although not too verse-like.²⁸ Some ancient authorities argued that the true difference between prose and verse was not meter at all, but diction, and that true poetry broken up and rearranged would still be poetry, and conversely that some metrical discourse did not deserve the name of poetry, because if rearranged it would simply be prose.²⁹ Such discussions, however, show a confusion between a signifying practice, which is an ensemble of different communicative acts, and the verbal elements of such a practice.³⁰ Metrical regularity becomes, after the breakdown of the signifying practices of rhapsodes, choral performers, etc., a sign of that signifying practice, an allusion to that signifying practice, just as a quotation of Homer can evoke the whole context of epic performance. A prose practice can utilize elements like poetic diction and rhythm—it can even quote verse directly—but this does not make the result a poem. Although it will involve some clumsiness, I would

²⁷Demosthenes is reported to have claimed that delivery (ὑπόκρισις) was the “first, second and third” in importance (Cicero, Orator, 17, 56).

²⁸Aristotle Rhetoric III, 3, 1-3; III, 8, 1; Demetrius, On Style, 180-81; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, On Literary Composition, 11; Cicero, Orator, 55, 187. For Isocrates, see Atkins.1934.130.

²⁹Aristotle, Poetics 1447b; Cicero, Orator, 20, 66-67; Orator 55, 183-4; Horace Sermones 1.4.39-63. Elsewhere rhythm is privileged: Isocrates Evagoras, 11; Demetrius of Phaleron, On Style, 179-85; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, On Literary Composition, 3. Quintilian considers history “a poem written in prose” (Inst. 10.1.31); Lucian (How to Write History 8) says that the introduction of divine agents makes of history a “sort of prose poetry” (πεζή τις ποιητική).

³⁰See Godzich and Kittay.1987.3-13

like to retain the word “prose” as it is used by Godzich and Kittay, but like them assert that the crucial difference is between a prose practice and a verse practice (or a performance-centered practice), not between metrical and unmetrical texts. Such a definition makes prose a very unstable category, but this is nothing new. If prose is the “other” of verse, then what prose is depends on what “verse” is, and that is not a stable category either.

Prosaics vs. Poetics

In opposing a prosaic practice to a poetic practice, we have Mikhail Bakhtin as a key theoretical precedent. In a number of essays, but particularly in “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin sets up a basic opposition between poetic discourse and prosaic discourse.³¹ The rise of the latter Bakhtin sees primarily as a social phenomenon as opposed to a formal one. It is associated with a number of key ideas Bakhtin elaborates with respect to the emergence of the novel as the premier prose form: the dialogization of styles, heteroglossia, and unfinalizability. In the essay “Epic and Novel,” Bakhtin introduces these ideas by way of an opposition between orally transmitted narrative in “a socially isolated and culturally deaf semipatriarchal society” and the “novelistic discourse” that emerges when such a society enters into “international and interlingual contacts and relationships.”³² The new consciousness that emerges in such a polyglot world jeopardizes the vitality of “monologic” poetic discourse, such as the epic, that must take for granted its special

³¹Bakhtin.1981. Useful discussion of Bakhtin’s prose/verse opposition can be found in Todorov.1984 and Morson and Emerson.1990.

³²Bakhtin.1981.11

status as the only appropriate mode of representing the most important truths of a society. The rise of novelistic discourse reveals that such discursive practices are merely styles, partial languages, arbitrary. In such a linguistic context, poetic genres become recognized for what they are: one kind of speaking among others, having validity in a narrow sphere and only if “other” languages and the worlds they represent/construct are kept out of the picture.

Novelistic discourse, on the other hand, is made up of a mixture of different styles. The novel is anti-generic, unable to be specified as a single kind of discourse; it is a container of styles rather than itself a homogeneous and distinctive style. When a poetic style becomes part of a novel, it is dislocated, abstracted from its native discursive context, and juxtaposed to other similarly dislocated styles. This process Bakhtin calls the “dialogization” of styles, or the “novelization” of styles. One result of this process is often parody, since these dislocated and juxtaposed stylistic types are made to look like mere stylizations: artificial and affected. The seriousness and loftiness of the epic, for example, depends in part on its link to the specificity of its discursive context: its performance at a specific time and in a specific place to a specific audience for whom it had special meaning, and for whom epic diction is the appropriate way to speak of these lofty and serious things. The novel, however lacks this spatial-temporal specificity for its production, circulation and consumption. There is no special event or set of circumstances associated with the reading of novels. As in the case of prose, the link between Bakhtin’s conception of “novelistic discourse” and writing is obvious: just as writing dislocates the verbal from the

situation of utterance, abstracts it from the situation of utterance, so also novelistic discourse dislocates and abstracts poetic styles from their native performative contexts and relocates them in a world populated with other similarly dislocated styles.

Bakhtin's opposition of a prosaic and a poetic practice arises as part of his response to the formalist approach to literature of his own contemporaries. His characterizations of poetry in opposition to prose or in opposition to the novel often have more to do with the characteristics that such formalist critics valorize in poetry. This proviso is necessary to understand such statements as the following:

The poet is a poet insofar as he accepts the idea of unitary and singular language and a unitary monologically sealed-off utterance. These ideas are immanent in the poetic genres with which he works.... Each word must express the poet's meaning directly and without mediation; there must be no distance between the poet and his word. The meaning must emerge from language as a single intentional whole.³³

This passage seems almost a caricature of those formalist critics who think of poetry as an "organic whole" whose greatest virtue is unity within complexity. This conception turns out to be a straw man to which Bakhtin will oppose his notion of novelistic discourse: dialogic rather than monologic, unfinal and irresolvably complex rather than unified and single. It is not necessary here to argue that works of art, whether poetic or prosaic, are complex and contradictory; nor is

³³Bakhtin. 1981. 296-7.

it necessary to argue whether the formalist conception of poems as “organic wholes” applies to ancient poetry. For our purposes, Bakhtin’s poetic/prosaic opposition can be seen as representing two different aspirations or tendencies of different types of discourse. It can be said that certain texts, even certain genres, aspire to the kind of monologic, unambiguous status Bakhtin ascribes to poetry in general, irrespective of their success at achieving that status. Homeric poetry, for example, with its formulaic language, its typical scenes and its invocation of memory and the past, is a poetic practice that seeks to produce a homogeneous representation of reality; it exemplifies what Bakhtin calls the “centripetal” forces of language that seek to “unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world.”³⁴ However, other types of discourse strike out in an entirely different direction. Socratic dialogue, for example, frequently foregrounds ambiguity, complicating and extending the range of meaning of traditional ideas. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Bakhtin cites Socratic dialogue as displaying the quintessential characteristics of novelistic discourse.

Understood in this way, the prosaics/poetics opposition can be thought of both as pertaining to characteristics of different discourses and as pertaining to the way in which we approach discourses, the kind of questions we ask of them. In the first instance, we can say that a discourse is more “poetic” the more strongly we recognize in it the attempt to forestall misinterpretation and ambiguity, the more strongly discursive resources are deployed to produce a unified and homogeneous view of the world. Mastery of

³⁴Bakhtin, 1981.270.

the effects of language is a “poetic” desire; and one index of such a desire will be how specifically the discourse is contextualized, how tightly the conditions of production and circulation are controlled. Discourses that are performed at particular occasions are thus more “poetic” because those occasions and circumstances serve to render the discourse less ambiguous, just as an oral performer’s presence supplements the verbal with interpretive gestures and intonations of voice. When a verse performance becomes unmoored from its performative context, as when it is written down, it immediately seems more open to multiple and contradictory interpretations. More “prosaic” discourses would be those that take for granted that meaning simply cannot be mastered once and for all, that celebrate heterogeneity and contradiction. Greek philosophy and history often contain epistemological musings about perspective and about the unreliability of the very human knowing that underlies those discourses. Such texts are part of what Bakhtin calls the “centrifugal” forces of language: they are “unfinal” and openended. Socratic dialogue and Mennipean satire are examples Bakhtin gives of prose texts that are “unfinal” in this way.

The poetics/prosaics opposition can also be thought of as a function of how we analyze texts, the kinds of questions we ask of them. The formalist study of texts, both prose and verse texts, the type of criticism that has dominated literary studies in the twentieth century, is primarily a poetic approach. By focusing on the structure of texts and the formal devices that operate in them, formalist criticism seeks to apprehend them as totalities. Such an approach seeks to reduce the complexity of texts, which are woven out of

inherently heterogeneous fabrics, into more simple and homogeneous wholes. A good theoretical articulation of such an approach is Michael Riffaterre's Semiotics of Poetry, in which poems are seen as complex iterations and transformations of a poetic "matrix" that can often be summarized as a simple sentence. Rhetorical analyses of prose texts, such as that of Richard Lanham's Analyzing Prose, which focuses on figures of speech and stylistic devices, are also examples of "poetic" approaches to prose works. It should come as no surprise that this kind of analysis played an important role in the discussion of rhetoric in antiquity. Such "poetic" analyses have enriched our understanding of language and literature enormously. However, another more "prosaic" approach is suggested by Godzich and Kittay:

This is where an approach that would be more characteristic of what we have taken to call prosaics may be called for. Trained as we are to perceive texts as totalities, we seek to apprehend their structure and, in the description of that structure, to assert our mastery over the text. Prosaics seeks instead to espouse the movement of the text as it manages the economy of its discourses, to establish where the thresholds of decision arise, what the decisions are, and what their motivations and determinations as well as their consequences have been. In other words, we must learn to follow the processive threading of the text.³⁵

³⁵Godzich and Kittay.1987.48

The prosaics envisioned here by Godzich and Kittay, carried out in their analyses of medieval French texts, differs from a poetics approach in its very conception of the creative process. The latter sees a text as a totality to be apprehended as such, so its linear unfolding is a progressive “revelation” of a predetermined meaning, as if language is a neutral instrument that an author can choose to use to communicate ideas and feelings that are independent of language. A prosaics approach, however, recognizes that we not only speak and write our language, but are in some sense spoken by it as well. If a poetics must assume to some degree the “idea of unitary and singular language and a unitary monologically sealed-off utterance,”³⁶ a prosaics acknowledges that language always comes to us used and abused by others, and that it is impossible to create a “singular language” that would express our meaning “directly and without mediation.” Prosaics thus sees the unfolding of a text as a managerial process that deploys various heterogeneous elements into a fabric with multiple and contradictory effects, and it notes how an author negotiates this heterogeneity, manages it, articulates it, operates within it, without seeking to reduce it to a spurious unity. Such an analysis could theoretically be carried out on any type of discourse, but it will be especially appropriate to those that are more “prosaic” in the first sense described above. It is also possible to conduct a “poetical” approach to “prosaic” discourse. However, such a procedure may be prejudicial against prose, and has in fact been partly responsible for the low esteem in which some texts—the ancient novels among them—have been held.

³⁶Bakhtin.1981.296, cited above p. 00.

Prosaics and the Ancient Novel

If we return to the critical assertions about the ancient novel with which I began, it is clear that those ideas have emerged from what I have been calling a “poetics” of the novel: an analysis of their form and an attempt to grasp them as a literary phenomenon based on their formal elements. Just as prose can be viewed as poetry without form, the novels are being seen basically as poetic types without form. However, just as prose can be seen as a new signifying practice that emerges to take the place of older practices organized around the presence and activity of a performer, so too the ancient novels can be seen as the advance of prosaic techniques in antiquity, or as prosaic “experiments” prompted by the obsolescence of poetic practices. With such a hypothesis in mind, we can ask what characteristics of the novels prompted the “poetic” assessments outlined above and try to account for them more positively within the framework of a prosaic analysis.

For example, although we eschew speaking of literary forms being “born” from the marriage of “parental” forms, the bastard theory of the novel, nevertheless, recognizes the fundamental heterogeneity of the novels. From a poetics standpoint, verse genres do a better job of maintaining a homogenous style due to their heritage as performed discourses. They have greater homogeneity precisely because they are discourses emanating from a performer at a particular place and time. Consistencies in decorum, diction and dialect all flow from this fact. A discourse is more prosaic, however, insofar as it is imagined emanating from nowhere in particular and

from no one in particular. Prose can be thought of as the process of weaving together pieces of language that do have some native context into a heterogeneous text that does not. From the perspective of those older and already situated discourses, the novel is thus a cacophony of stylistic modulations; but from the standpoint of prose, those monolithic genres are like ready-made modules that can be mobilized at will by a prose practice for purposes that are quite foreign to the spirit and decorum of those genres.

Consider, for example, the beginning of Chariton's Chaereas and Callirhoe, the earliest of the complete extant novels:

My name is Chariton, of Aphrodisias, and I am clerk to the attorney Athenagoras. I am going to tell you the story of a love affair that took place in Syracuse.

The Syracusan general Hermocrates, the man who defeated the Athenians, had a daughter called Callirhoe. She was a wonderful girl, the pride of all Sicily; her beauty was more than human, it was divine, and it was not the beauty of a Nereid or mountain nymph at that, but of the maiden Aphrodite herself. Report of the astonishing vision spread everywhere, and suitors flocked to Syracuse, rulers and tyrants' sons, not just from Sicily but from southern Italy too and father north, and from foreigners in those parts. But Eros intended to make a match of his own devising. There was a young man called Chaereas, surpassingly handsome, like Achilles and Nireus and Hippolytus and Alcibiades as sculptors and painters portray them. His father, Ariston, was second

only to Hermocrates in Syracuse, and the two were political rivals, so that they would have made a marriage alliance with anyone rather than with each other. But Eros likes to win and enjoys succeeding against the odds. He looked for his opportunity and found it as follows.³⁷

The hero and heroine quickly meet, fall in love and are married. The narration of these events is filled with allusions to literary predecessors. This first section of the novel, in fact, is the most densely allusive segment of the entire story. Beginnings are places where one expects orientation, establishment of a ground, perspectives—in a word, presence—and hence prose tends to lean on more poetic discourses at this critical moment. Unlike epic, which can start in the middle of things precisely because the whole cycle of myth has a certain self-similarity and is, as Bakhtin notes, a sort of “perennial middle,”³⁸ the novel requires greater exposition. Chariton begins by opening up a multitude of narrative possibilities and expectations: a political rivalry between the parents of the lovers, a mischievous divine agent, Eros, the stunning and fatal beauty of the lovers, the rivalry of suitors. There follow mention of legendary and historical figures and references to well-known plots of epic and drama. Such allusions hint at the kind of story we are to hear. They provoke in the reader what Umberto Eco calls “inferential walks,” preliminary hypotheses about what will happen next and how things will turn out.³⁹ Will this be a story of human hybris? of divine retribution? Will it be a story dealing with the anxieties of exogamy?

³⁷Reardon.1989.21-2.

³⁸Bakhtin.1981.31-2

³⁹Eco.1979

of a tragic conflict between private desire and public duty? Chariton returns to some of these allusions elsewhere in the novel, but none of them is what Riffaterre would call the matrix of this novel story as a whole, the basis of the story's generation. Like the opening sentence, which recalls the openings of Herodotus and Thucydides, these paragraphs are at the beginning because they are the kind of beginnings that are available to Chariton. Once the story is underway the novel author and reader soon forget about the expectations that are created here as a temporary scaffolding to get things begun. So also, no further reference is made to "Chariton of Aphrodisas," the "clerk of Athenagoras," although the first sentence may have suggested to us that the author's identity and activity as a personal witness would parallel that of Herodotus and Thucydides. At various points in the story a need will be felt to anchor the shifting movement of the story in some sort of presence, and these places are marked by various epiphanies of divine entities: sometimes Eros again, but elsewhere Aphrodite, Tyche or Pronoia.⁴⁰ A poetic reading of these elements would try to collect them as they occur throughout the story and seek some thematic continuity and significance to their occurrence; but such a reading of Chariton is very unsatisfactory. References to divine agents are trotted out to function as temporary stepping stones in the storytelling, rather than as touchstones to the major themes of the story. If they somehow resonate broadly in a meaningful way, all the better; and we occasionally see explicit attempts by the author to project such a

⁴⁰A similar multiplication of divine agents in Xenophon's Ephesian Tale prompted R. Merkelbach to argue that this text must be a redaction of an Isis story by a devotee of Helios. See Hägg.1966.

resonance; but if they do not, that is the kind of aleatory world that both prose and the novelistic heroes operate in. More poetic texts have a stronger stake in establishing permanent relationships, in anchoring meaning in some sort of presence, in comprehending change by fitting it into already existing paradigms. The often noted “passivity” of novelistic characters does not reflect a general decline of character in the author’s real world, but heralds a world in which activity means adjusting to ever-shifting environments, “going with the flow” without the benefit of fixed identities.

In Heliodorus’s Aithiopika, the holy man Kalisiris narrates almost half of the story, an episode that clearly harks back to Odysseus’ narrative on Scheria. However, our general impression of Kalisiris from this performance is not anything like that of his epic predecessor, but, as Winkler notes, “that of a shrewd but very passive observer, one who knows a good deal more than those he is watching and who uses opportunities that are presented to him, but not one who makes things happen.”⁴¹ Kalisiris possesses the kind of literacy required of prose readers, who must constantly be making hypotheses and adjusting them along the way; but he also is a representative of the prose author, who is constructing a more radically experimental plot than is typical of his poetic predecessors, and who is sometimes carried along in an unforeseen way by the forces inherent in the heterogeneous materials at his disposal. In another study, Winkler calls Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe a “theorematic” novel, in which “the author may have no single intention but rather experiments with a variety of possibilities and

⁴¹Winkler.1982.130.

perspectives, shifting from scene to scene. Though Longus is clearly thinking in terms of a social geometry of desire, it is not clear (and may not be true) that he is committed to a single Euclidean system.”⁴² Winkler’s evocation of a non-Euclidean geometry, in which there may be more than one straight line between any two points and in which parallel lines perhaps meet somewhere, is an excellent analogue for prosaic discourse, for it suggests its heuristic and counter-intuitive character—“intuitive” here understood as “traditional ways of seeing things.”

Prose is a more abstract discourse than its poetic predecessors because it is not tied (nor imagined to be tied) to a specific locus of production and reception, and Godzich and Kittay note that the effects of this can be observed at many levels. For example, demonstrative pronouns have a referential (ostensive) dimension and a grammatical dimension. A performer tends to reinforce the referential function of demonstratives by the use of gesture and intonation; but prose tends to privilege grammatical connections and can construct positions within the narrative based entirely on such relationships.⁴³ For this reason prose tends to give stricter attention to grammatical subordination and organization in comparison to the more paratactic performer-centered practices, understanding the term “parataxis” to apply not only to syntax, but also to the “unfolding of units with uniform apprehensibility.”⁴⁴ However, prose can also make a virtue out of the loss of the performer because

⁴²Winkler.1990.111.

⁴³Godzich and Kittay.1987.33-39.

⁴⁴Godzich and Kittay.1987.242. Cf. “Zielinsky’s law” that in Homer simultaneous events must be narrated consecutively.

it is no longer limited to what is able to be represented. It is not unusual, for example, to encounter in the ancient novels the phenomenon of stories within stories involving reports of reports of reported speech, a difficult complication for a performance-based discourse to represent.⁴⁵ Nor is it unusual to find the inscription of multiple and shifting points of view, something prose again can handle more easily than performance, since point of view need not emanate from “persons,” but can emanate from a textual function.⁴⁶ The Roman novels of Petronius and Apuleius afford better examples of this potential than any of the extant Greek ones. As Winkler has shown in his brilliant discussion of Apuleius, the question “Who is that speaking?” that is posed in the prologue of The Golden Ass can be deferred and complicated indefinitely in a prosaic text, providing a constant and surprising multiplication of perspectives that never converges in any final authoritative viewpoint or even in a particular person:

“[T]he remarkable thing about [the Golden Ass] is that it does not allow us to shift all responsibility for its meaning onto the person Lucius or the person Apuleius. It insists instead on being, like the prologue, a nexus of connected identities, an enigma that offers itself to be resolved, humorously overcoded as a challenge for every kind of reader from the naive to the sophisticated to give an answer to the question quis ille?”⁴⁷

⁴⁵See Voloshinov.1973 for the development of styles of reported speech and its relationship to the emergence of novelistic discourse.

⁴⁶Godzich and Kittay.1987. 53-76.

⁴⁷Winkler.1985.203.

A maximum amount of perspectival instability is possible in Apuleius because a semblance of stability is built around the activity of the reader, who must constantly reevaluate the position and identity of the main narrator as the story unfolds. Prose thus makes possible a greater emphasis on cognition and perception of action than on the action itself. The novels are strong indicators of this development given the tremendous investment in plot interest centered around misinterpretation and partial perceptions. These characteristics wreak havoc on a “poetic” analysis; they make the novels look monstrous, and this is reflected in the bastard theory of the novel.

The decadence theory of the novel calls attention to another aspect of this situation: the progress of prose and of the dialogic juxtaposition (as Bakhtin calls it) of traditional genres within the novel makes those generic stylizations look a little silly within the novel, or at least look like mere stylizations instead of the natural or appropriate way to speak about certain things. Placed in the context of the novel, the epic or drama or the pastoral retain their significance, "but at the same time they are 'qualified' and 'externalized,' shown as something historically relative, delimited and incomplete—in the novel they, so to speak, criticize themselves."⁴⁸ The appearance of the novel is part of the historical process by which certain stylizations are rendered obsolete—not because there is no longer anyone around talented enough to compose epics or dramas, but because the discursive and social situation appropriate to those genres have disappeared and made them “unwritable” in some

⁴⁸Bakhtin.1981.45

sense.⁴⁹ The novel becomes the great container in which reified fragments of these genres will take their place alongside others. When critics take the novel to be an exhausted version of these genres, or as an alien intrusion grafted onto them, they are exhibiting a kind of nostalgia: these “prosifications” of traditional genres are the only real future those genres have.

The notion that the novels were composed for various special audiences—youth, women, bourgeoisie, religious devotees—also has its truth; for prose takes for granted the existence of various specialized discourses which are partly incommensurable with each other. Prose, with its special abilities at moving among already constituted discourses, has the appropriate decorum for articulating relationships among the heterogeneous codes of a more fragmented social order. At the same time, because prose shifts a greater burden of interpretation onto the reader, prose seems to demand more interpretive labor and seems more pregnant with special and hidden meanings. As a discourse organized more around the interpretive activity of a reader than around the interpretive activity of a performer, prose marks an advance towards private and personal interpretation instead of the affirmation of shared meaning. If the novel heralds the dissolution of “poetic” ways of organizing meaning and discourse, it also marks the beginning of a more self-conscious search for ways to navigate a world bereft of such meaning. Like most critics, Reardon rejects the theory of a purely religious origin of the novel, but he is certainly correct to feel that the novel and the

⁴⁹Bowie.1970 relates the archaizing of the second sophistic to the political disenfranchisement of Greek intellectual classes.

mystery religions that became so important about the same time are made of the same stuff.⁵⁰

Finally, the low esteem in which the novels are generally held takes for granted the norms of traditional genres. But the fact is that the novels themselves are part of the development of new aesthetic criteria against which the poetic genres will inevitably seem quaint and old fashioned. In the modern era the prose novel will eventually edge out all of its competitors to become the premier form of literary achievement. Although various poetic genres from classical antiquity will continue to be produced from late antiquity down through the renaissance, they will not be able to effect the kind of self-transformation of which the more protean prose discourses will prove themselves capable. Eventually, verse becomes indicative of preciousness to a degree unthinkable in antiquity.⁵¹ In a discursive world in which prose becomes dominant, poetry will have to be satisfied with becoming a sign of an older and more simple discursive age that has passed forever.

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⁵⁰Reardon.1991.171-2 Cf. also Schmeling.1980.113-14 and Schmeling.1974.34-6.

⁵¹But see the remarks of Aelius Aristides (Hymn to Serapis 1-13), who argues that prose is superior to poetry, is historically prior and is equally appropriate to verse for composing hymns to the gods.

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