

Poetry and Prose

The difference between poetry and prose?

Poetry sings, prose talks. Poetry dances, prose walks. Poetry's fewer words with more ("deeper") meaning. Poetry's about form while prose is about content. Poetry's the memory and prose the remembrance. Poetry's constructed in lines, whereas prose is constructed in paragraphs.

Don't know, but I know it when I see it!

The amount of clichés about the difference between poetry and prose is quite sufficient. Abundant, even. In all honesty, there's boatloads and shitloads of opinions on the matter. There's so much of it that when you start acquainting yourself with the ideas you'd wish you'd never heard of either one.

The clichés are mostly as true as they're untrue. Poetry sings, but it also talks—the Persian word for "poetic body of work" is "kalam", which literally means "talk" in Arabic. Poetry dances, but it also walks. There's a million walking poems, from Wordsworth to T.S. Eliot to John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara. Sarah Cullen's Maps is a series of visual poems created by a pendulum device—a box with a swinging pen inside that wrote the poems while the poet took walks in Florence.

A lot of conceptual poetry is more words with less apparent meaning—some conceptual poems are computer engines that produce infinite amounts of texts with no apparent meaning. Most war poetry or love poetry is more about content than form and many so-called proseworks, such as Joyce's Ulysses or Stein's The Making of Americans, have a lot more to do with form than content.

Hal Sirowitz' poetry books Mother Said and Father Said are the remembrance, whereas Proust's prose masterpiece, À la recherche du temps perdu, is memory. The most instantly recognisable feature of poetry, for any layman at least, is the line-breaking. Poetry tends to be cut into short lines. The French poet Jacques Roubaud has called it le vers libre international—international free verse, a plague on all your houses—in effect nothing more than lineated prose and not poetry at all. Of course you don't have to read a lot of poetry, or be acquainted with any radical avant-garde, to realise that much poetry is not divided into short lines. Take Ginsberg or Whitman, Rimbaud or Octavio Paz. Sometimes they get classified as "prose poems", but a lot of the time such a definition proves seriously lacking.

The American poet James Sherry once pointed out that a piece of paper has a definite economic value. Paper is a commodity that can be sold for profit in the marketplace. The production cost is lower than the selling price. Sherry also noted that when you print a poem

on it, this value is lost. Sherry's colleague and friend, Charles Bernstein, calculated that a print-run of 2000 copies of a poetry book from Sun & Moon Press, that sells out in two years, actually loses money.

This does not go for prose. When you print prose on a piece of paper, it actually increases in economic value. Isn't that amazing?

Which leads me to the only usable explanation of the difference between poetry and prose that I've come across so far (after about a decade of looking): If the text that you've written sells for less than it cost you to produce it, chances are you're not a novelist but a poet. ☘

Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl's third novel, *Gæska* (Kindness), has just been published by *Mál & menning*.

Chaos, and the Future of Art in the 21st Century



So, post-modernism is dead. Its terminal illness began near the start of a new century, on September 11th, 2001. Postmodernism is hard to define but one knows it when one sees it. The Oxford defines it as a "distrust of theories and ideologies," whereas Webster says that when it comes to literature it is "ironic self-reference and absurdity."

Now, a healthy distrust in ideologies might seem like sensible option after having seen both communism and capitalism followed through to their ironic and absurd extremes. The problem, however, is that when it comes down to it, we all need something to believe in, some sort of world view to give this whole mess meaning. The need for a world view is almost as fundamental as the need to eat or fuck, and is what defines us a species. Without it, disaster follows.

In the 1920s and 30s, distrust of ideologies was rife in Weimar Germany. After the country's collapse in World War I, no one

believed in anything anymore. Apart from a certain ex-soldier, who blamed it all on the Jews. When no thoughtful alternatives are offered, angry nonsense takes over. In the past decades, we have seen a bit of history repeating. Ever since Vietnam or thereabouts, a defeat for Western military and ideological supremacy as thorough in the long run as Germany's collapse in World War I, people started turning to religion again in a big way. It was the easy solution. The educated classes turned to a more complex, but equally nonsensical, solution.

The War on Thought

In Post-Modernism, everything was open to doubt, and to interpretation. There was no way to be sure of anything anymore, even language itself was distrusted. Into this intellectual power vacuum, a new ideology moved in. This was the free market, and its ideologues seemed so sure of what they were saying that people couldn't help but go along. Small wonder then that in the age of Post-modernism,

a character such as George W. Bush, free of intellectual doubt, ruled the world.

Not everyone fell for it. Feminists never really cared much for post-modernism. They were dealing with real problems and real solutions. The same was true of other "minorities" the world over who did not have the luxury of believing that nothing really mattered. But in the big picture, free market missionaries easily rode roughshod over self-doubting intellectuals, who offered little resistance.

Much like Hitler did with Germany, Bush tried to revive American (and by association Western) military might. He failed just as miserably, but the question future generations will ask themselves is this: Why was he allowed to try?

Whatever vestiges there remained of Post-modernism surely disappeared with last year's economic collapse. 9/11 might have reminded us that there was an outside world, but on October 6th, we really felt it. The economic collapse was noticed by everyone. Art could no longer afford to lose itself in itself when the outside world intruded so violently.

During the boom, art had its own niche. Artists were given grants by the banks. The consensus was that the grants would not influence the artists' works. Nor did anyone assume that artists, working on behalf of the banks, would influence how the banks were perceived.

The artists' job was simply to deal with art itself, and leave the rest of society be. Others protested, but why worry about what artists have to say when their job is simply to be decorative, or, as the phrase had it, "cute."

Artists, like most Icelanders, like nothing more than to be left alone to plough their own garden. Of course, according to the tenants of Post-modernism, everything was self-referential and there was no way to explain the outside world anyway, so what did it all matter?

I'm Not Here

But there is nowhere to run to. The film I'm Not Here, based on the life of Bob Dylan, illustrates this point beautifully. The character, tired of conflict, abandons political anthems and leaves the world to become a country singer up in the mountains. But his rural bliss is intruded upon when the big corporations start building dams in the highlands, and he must battle with them again. If you don't fight them now, you will only have to fight them later, and on worse terms.

My own such moment came when, trying to leave the rampant marketplace of the city, I went to visit Halldór Laxness' museum at Gjúfrasteinn in the summer of 2008. They handed me an iPod with the logo of a bank on it and I realised that either the banks would collapse, or Icelandic culture would.

The banks, and the whole manic boom, took control of many artists, who sold their image and credibility to advertisers, and thus enabled companies to reach people who might never have fallen for pure salesmanship, but who believed in the arts. With the help of constant advertising and success stories from abroad, Iceland became a nation of cheerleaders who spurned the banks on to ever greater excess.

To understand anything, you must understand everything. This, of course, is very hard to achieve. Nevertheless, it is the only intellectual goal really worth achieving.

(to be continued...) ☘
- VALUR GUNNARSSON

Books | Review

Two New Guidebooks To Iceland

The Real Iceland

Páll Ásgeir Ásgeirsson
Forlagið (2009) – 2.490 ISK

Top 10 Reykjavík and Iceland

Dr. Gunní
Sögur (2009) – 2.490 ISK



Need to buy a guidebook to Iceland? You can choose from Lonely Planet, the Rough Guides, Frommer's, Insight Guides, and the Bradt Guides. Don't want to pay? The annually updated Around Iceland is available as a free PDF download from heimur.is/world, and there are tons of free travel advice about Iceland at tripadvisor.com.

But there are still people who think they can write and sell a better guidebook, even while lacking the brand recognition and distribution channels of the mainstream guides. Two new books, both by Icelandic authors, have just come out. Both cost 2.490 ISK (2.241 ISK at Bóksala stúdentta).

Páll Ásgeir Ásgeirsson is a guidebook veteran and has written many books on the Icelandic outdoors. His 95-page, nicely laid-out The Real Iceland claims to tell "the truth about Iceland" and to expose "things not always revealed or obvious to strangers." It's in essay format, with no listings or opening hours. It's written for reading enjoyment rather than reference, and includes a pleasing though fairly conventional selection of photographs. Despite the title, the book focuses on Reykjavík.

The English in the book has a translated feel to it. It's hard to tell what happened, but I think that the translation was competently done, just not sent for revision and polishing afterwards.

The Real Iceland does try hard to give the inside scoop. It tells us, for example, that "laws in Iceland are meaningless"

and that those who own a summer house are just "fleeing from one town to another." There is much truth in these and other observations, but sometimes they land with a bit of a thud. I wished the book had lingered a bit on them, and tried to unpeel another layer or two of nuance.

Overall, The Real Iceland is a good try and makes for a quick, innocuous read, but I have a hard time justifying spending 2490 ISK on it. If you want hard-hitting essays on modern Iceland, I still recommend Bart Cameron's Grapevine Guide to Iceland, which came out in 2006 and which I've seen remaindered for about 500 ISK.

The cover of Dr. Gunní's Top 10 Reykjavík and Iceland made me think it was a slapdash product and the title told me little. Inside, I saw that the book is all listings, a paragraph for each one. Then I realised that the whole 180-page book is a series of top-ten lists: top ten museums in Reykjavík, top ten swimming pools, top ten sights in the West Fjords, top ten dates in Icelandic history.

The layout is rather busy and distracting. But when I started reading my opinions brightened. There is one great mystery to this book: not only is the writing good, the English is very good. Nowhere do we learn who is responsible for this—a translator, a proofreader, or perhaps Dr. Gunní himself? Dr. Gunní, by the way, is not a doctor. He's an Icelandic media personality, among other things a music journalist, and frequent contributor to this very magazine.

The top-ten lists turn out to be fun to read, partly because you can disagree with them. I very much disagree with Dr. Gunní's choice of the top ten Icelandic DVDs (Cold Fever? Come on!) and I found his choice of books doubtful too. But mostly I liked his opinions. There are a few ads, but just a few. The book tries to be a real guidebook, with accommodations and restaurant advice, and maps of Reykjavík and Iceland on the inside covers. It covers the countryside pretty well. It gives websites, addresses, prices and opening hours. There's a helpful index.

Not just tourists, but also people who live here will enjoy browsing this book. I came away convinced that the top-ten format can actually work if handled well. ☘ - IAN WATSON

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