1 Introduction
The project of prose and early modern literary studies

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Like a kind of Antarctica, prose remains one of the last undefined, untheorized bodies of writing in the early modern European languages. It is also the largest. Notions of style, of the literary, of genre, and of discipline have served to characterize early modern prose, but only partially; none of these categories can describe the field of prose with the fullness and precision the literary map allows poetry, the other major discursive medium. The history of prose, unlike that of poetry, has fragmented over time with the consolidation of each modern discipline; consequently the disciplines retain only partial views of the textual record of their own pasts. This volume collects essays from literary scholars of various nations and languages who have begun to reconsider early modern prose, asking new questions, finding new answers, and fashioning a history that reaches outside their disciplinary confines to appraise more clearly the textual production of a period before those confines were set in place. The conception of the volume reflects the editors' conviction that early modern prose cannot be covered by ten or twenty essays, but must be represented – to the extent a medium that offers itself as a virtual approximation of reality itself can be represented – by strategically identified moments in which its uses and limits are on display and under discussion. Accordingly, the volume contains little or nothing on many topics that would be indispensable to a survey of the period's canonical prose: Castiglione, Elyot, Machiavelli, Euphuism, prose drama, the character, the *pensée*, Padre Vieira, the captivity narrative, and so on. And it foregrounds a number of topics that might seem oblique to established canons – but then the principle of attention here is to make the poetics of prose visible in a wide array of literary and nonliterary instances, to introduce signal texts such as Fernão Mendes Pinto's *Peregrinação* (1614) across national borders, and to experiment with new approaches that may unlock many prose texts not treated here.

Prose has received a steady trickle of attention over the last century as a line of critics since the 1920s, beginning with George Saintsbury and Morris L. Croll, has traced and explained local, partisan, or national

instances of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century prose in operation.[1] While it contains some significant disagreements of historical interpretation – such as that between Croll and R. F. Jones, or between George Williamson and Joan Webber – this line shares a single idea of how one thinks about prose as a problem: it has something called a "style." To call this term into question, we need only note that such a use of "style" effectively turns "prose" into an adjective and attenuates many of the relevant aesthetic and cultural issues. Indeed, the stylistic protocol for treating prose seems to be moving aside under pressure from changes in the critical profession.

One direction for the future may perhaps be extrapolated from the arguments of Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, who have described prose as first developing its identity as a "signifying practice" in the Middle Ages through the linguistic outlet of French, notwithstanding earlier prose in other languages (e.g., the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) where the conditions of such a practice are presumably not yet met; as containing other discourses in the same way they are separately contained by the nonverbal world, so that prose seems coextensive with the world, "the way things are"; and as "control[ling], contain[ing] within it, the authority that it uses for guaranteeing itself, authorizing itself."[2] Theirs would be a controversial argument if it were widely known, but Godzich and Kittay set themselves against a literary-historical tide that assumes prose as such needs no poetics, did not "emerge" at any particular time or place, and has always existed as a discursive program in the same way that it has existed as a medium. Perhaps no one would argue that because the medium of poetry has always existed, its discursive modes such as dramatic, lyric, and epic have no histories worth noting; but with this observation one can see that the modes of poetry have long been institutionalized as major western genres, while the equivalent modes of prose – including history, law, philosophy, and science as well as literary prose – have largely become the property of the different disciplines and hence have been more or less unavailable for comparative analysis. Another way of saying this is that the conceptual space to be negotiated between the medium of prose and its literary genres such as the essay and the novella stretches much more widely than that between poetry and its genres, because in the case of prose the recognized genres scarcely reflect the multitudinous practices underway in the medium. Imagine that there were early modern legal poetry, scientific poetry, and so forth, but that as scholars we were more or less limited to considering – as poetry – the modes and genres, such as epic and lyric, that show up in literature proper. How much less well would we understand the nature of poetry in the period?

The emergence of prose as a signifying practice as opposed to a medium, Godzich and Kittay suggest, coincides with the rise of the secular, bureaucratic state in thirteenth-century France, and in fact much of their explanatory power is concentrated on the extended moment in medieval French literature they scan, and on its later resonances in the same tradition from Montaigne to Mallarmé.[3] Certainly an emphasis on the relation of the evolving practices of prose to social institutions is widely useful, but a great deal of specific work remains to be done collating and evaluating the vast corpus of postmedieval, premodern writing in prose. Not only do institutions (such as the "state") change, but the meaning of writing practices alters precipitously with time and cannot be fixed for later centuries by defining an original appearance. Conversely, prose studies too often have worked backwards, straining to fit texts into a chronological, even genealogical narrative governed by the categories of modern formalism.

The narrative history of forms can illuminate the imaginative and technical creativity of individual authors, but tends to bury the changing ideological charge evident in particular appearances of the forms themselves. Broadly put, the "difference" between poetry and prose "itself" can be shown to be substantially restructured between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century. Unlike poetry, which is often said to be always itself, autonomous and visible, and therefore always contemporaneous with us even as it delivers antique events or obsolete ideas, prose is often seen as invisible, as coterminous with its contents: this is the modern notion of prose as a disposable vehicle, which Montaigne anticipated in his "Consideration sur Ciceron" of 1580 ("Fy de l'eloquence qui nous laisse envie de soy, non des choses" ["Fie on that eloquence, which leaves us with a desire of it, and not of things"]), and Paul Valéry reformulated in turn nearly fifty years ago.[4] However such a description might fit with modern writing (or modern writing might have adjusted to it), it is plainly inexpedient for the prose with which this book of essays is concerned. George Puttenham, Miguel de Cervantes, even Montaigne himself probably would not have endorsed it as a general proposition – early modern practitioners, even those whose business it was to theorize about painting or poetry, were fully able to entertain essentially contradictory notions about the all-purpose, sometimes self-effacing practice of prose. But the opposite position, which might see prose as a worthy stock for high art, is equally problematic in Renaissance Europe: while Roger Ascham, in a notorious dictum of 1570, argues the converse of Montaigne's position ("Ye know not what hurt ye do to learning, that care not for wordes but for matter, and so make a devorse betwixt the tong and the hart"), his contention is clearly

provocative in its contemporary setting.[5] Perhaps a statement of the early modern consensus about the vitality of both media can be recovered by going back to the end of the Middle Ages, to Dante's fundamental distinction between poetry and prose in the second book of *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (written circa 1302), where he claims to prefer the former while conceding the tractability of the latter, all the while writing in a Latin that in itself discloses residual distrust of the emergent vernacular prose.[6] On empirical evidence, most writers and readers of the early modern period take something of Dante's eclectic, pragmatic, but finally elusive attitude towards prose, between the polemical positions of the contemporary styles and schools.

Henri Meschonnic, in his monumental *Critique du Rythme: Anthropologie Historique du Langage* (1982), argues that the binary distinction between poetry and prose is a fairly recent one, endorsed by the Romantics and developed by formalist and structuralist theorists of the twentieth century.[7] Much of Meschonnic's purpose is to insist that modernism and postmodernism have undone that distinction – that what was understood as natural over several centuries has come to seem constructed once again, and with that, the prospects available to poets and writers are seen to expand. In supplement to Godzich and Kittay's argument we would insist that prose in their sense is still "emerging" in the early modern period, in settings much removed from medieval France; and to complicate Meschonnic's etiology we would stipulate that the modern dichotomy between poetry and prose is often visible in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, depending on a variety of intellectual and cultural factors.

In her essay in this volume, for instance, Paula Blank shows that for a certain class of linguistic reformers in sixteenth-century England, the familiar polarity between these two media takes on a third element: to adapt Meschonnic's categories, there is prose, which ostensibly runs close to actual speech; there is poetry, a heightened medium that has license to depart from everyday language; and then there is the special category we might call prose about language, in which a select group of adepts such as Alexander Gill, Richard Mulcaster, and their continental counterparts propose to alter and adjust the very codes of civil, literary, and private communication. The latter project, carried on continually since Dante's time, can occur only in prose; it necessarily stretches and deforms the body of prose – into glossaries, tables, dictionaries – but mostly relies on the reformers' being able to expound on language itself in a flexible, self-conscious medium that can receive and comment on these disruptions. In other words, the project of linguistic reform in this period depends on a notion of prose not simply as located under poetry in a hierarchy, or

against it in a dichotomy, but enveloping it – both more and less than poetry, as the twentieth-century heirs of Gill and Mulcaster, such as Gertrude Stein, have recognized. Prose as a medium is often plainer and more utilitarian than poetry, but is sometimes more layered and nuanced than any poem can manage, capable of both the merest exchanges of information between persons and of such ambitious projects as introducing (in Blank's quotation of Thomas Blount's haunting phrase) a "self-stranger Nation" to itself.

While poetry and drama seem to invite a limited consensus around the matter of the emergence of the "literary," that agreement dissolves when we turn to prose: it exists as a site of intellectual and cultural transmission between the categories of medium and genre, it is a literary constituent that unquestionably exists without literature itself, and it holds out longer and harder against being subsumed into literary categories than many such elements.[8] Seen in itself (if that is possible) rather than as the extrapolated antecedent of modern narrative history, the novel, scientific discourse, or other recent constructions, early modern prose has not been accounted for by theories of genre, and perhaps cannot be.[9] But its neglect by historians, literary critics, and others – as we see it, their reluctance to be interested in such prose in its own right – often conceals the cultural importance of the prose texts themselves, and plays down their affinities with each other. For example, much English and continental prose fiction of the sixteenth century has been beleaguered by being seen primarily as an instrument of Shakespeare studies. One might speculate how *Don Quijote* (1605 and 1615) might be received differently by an English-speaking readership – perhaps as more present but less autonomous, more a "source" than a freestanding display of possibilities – if Shakespeare's play *Cardenio* had not been lost. To develop the example from our own field, it is clear that the early prose fiction of England manifests numerous, specific bonds with law, with diplomacy, with colonial exploration, not to mention with the continental literatures. A visit to the recent books on early English fiction, however, turns up practically none of these connections.[10] Meanwhile, even the best work on (say) legal history or the American colonial enterprise rarely invokes any sense of prose as a medium, of genre, of what might be involved in language and ideas negotiated into prose during a period of heavy social, economic, political, and aesthetic change. Most often the reader is unable even to tell what kinds of writing lie behind such histories, where prose texts establish evidence for the conclusions of historians but are then effaced.[11] We do not see transparently into past lives and events: we see through the prose record. It is our hope that literary scholars will help

historians to consider more fully and usefully the nature of their evidence.

The essays gathered here do not merely turn what has been called genre theory on the relevant prose texts, which would be to overprivilege the literary dimension of such texts; for our purposes conventional genre theory, whose variables are often limited to an abstract pattern and its realizations in particular texts, achieves only a two-dimensional picture of its objects.[12] Instead, these essays attempt to witness generic issues in the context of a more-than-literary investigation, and to widen the boundaries around the concept of genre as well. Thus it is a representatively heterogeneous collection of verbal artifacts that the writers here have chosen, in a deliberate departure from previous styles of reading and writing criticism. Working with a broadly defined cultural setting that both moves and refuses to remain a background, these analyses offer fresh ways of recovering the significance of many other texts not treated here.

Such an approach is mandated by a period in which aesthetic strategies that allow for prose's mobility as well as its identity are liberally shared between established genres, and serve as building-blocks to sustain prose texts when they experiment outside generic bounds in pursuit of new objects. The pressure for such experimentation can be seen often in the period: for instance, in the Spaniard María de Zayas's *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* (1637), where a round of *Decameron*-style tale-telling over five nights is supposed to present not Cervantine *novelas* but "maravillas" ("marvels"): "que con este nombre quiso desempalagar al vulgo del de novelas, título tan enfadoso, que ya en todas partes le aborrecen" ("in using this term she wanted to avoid the common term 'novella,' so trite that it was now entirely out of fashion").[13] In fact, such ad hoc prose forms are everywhere in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Only a few, more easily treated kinds – the sermon, certain types of legal actions and writs, the chronicle – manage to retain their status as recognizable generic forms while undergoing the fundamental changes one expects in the early modern period. Critical techniques honed in the study of poetry and drama have been profitably transferred to such generic objects of study and, together with the attention that prose fiction has received from historians of the novel, have produced what well-charted terrain lies in the province of early modern prose. In this volume we have avoided the novel-oriented and thus fatally retrospective attention given to prose fiction because we aim to develop a contrasting picture of the shapes and roles of prose as motivated by its own past and present history, rather than its future. The most interesting material for the scholars represented here is that of texts not easily described by the

analytical tools appropriate to poetry, drama, or the novel. How do such texts attain audiences, aesthetic and persuasive power, closure? How does the incipient genre of the colonial *relación* determine what Europeans know and believe of the Americas? How do forms arise to invent and effect the aspirations of newly restless social groups such as middle-class businessmen, educated women, colonists, and *mestizos*?

Perhaps most intriguing, how do the prose kinds in this period, familiar and uncharted alike, relate to each other across their common medium? One might say that more often than we now recognize, early modern prose genres collaborate invisibly with one another to enclose a larger sample of reality than any genre or text might do by itself. There is perhaps a kind of intellectual outlook native to prose as a medium, less coherent and controlled than those of any single genre or of poetry, but more speculative, provisional, and accommodating to multiple perspectives than any of these alternative views; even drama, with its built-in contrarieties, seems schematic and closed compared to the constitutive indeterminacies of early modern prose. In these terms, the boundaries of particular works often matter less in prose than they would in other media, as contemporaneous audiences look intuitively to prose texts of different orientations to complement, augment, and contextualize one another.

For example, the genres of utopia and picaresque – which emerged within forty years of each other, the former in Thomas More's fiction that named the genre (1516) and the latter in the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) – are seldom if ever discussed together. Because in the present day they attract different scholarly guilds, we treat them as though they had very different contemporaneous readerships. But taken at once, these two kinds represent a deeply complementary view of sixteenth-century society. Utopia not only is a genre of fiction but becomes an indispensable term or concept in the critical theory of society as elaborated by the Frankfurt School out of Hegel and Marx, in a tradition that goes back to Plato's *Republic*. And one readily understands how the properties of More's fiction make it a likely term for critical analysis: its static and monologic quality and its lack of a meaningful plot or characters make it seem analytical and synthetic rather than dynamic and open-ended. The narrator of *Utopia*, Raphael Hythlodaeus, is not so much a protagonist as a model for the social scientist: he offers a careful description of exactly what critical theorists aspire to disclose, the invisible structures of society seen not from the limited perspective of social agents but from the transsubjective view of the scientist. If *Utopia* as an early anticipation of critical theory omits anything, it is precisely that limited perspective, which post-Enlightenment theorists are urged to

engage in order to measure how individuals are alienated from their own social circumstances. As a result, *Utopia* provokes in its readers a consciousness of themselves as those social agents whose views are synthesized away in the fiction itself, and thus an ideologically unified text produces an ideologically diffuse response in the world – an unruly clatter of reactions ranging from hostility to emulation. One might have said much the same of Francis Bacon's seventeenth-century utopia *New Atlantis* (1626), except for its fragmentary or "broken" quality, which Amy Boesky treats here and which perhaps operates as a trope of limited perspective – almost an inarticulate, gestural way of acknowledging the utopia's built-in bias against individual subjectivity. Bacon's text thus includes a pressure valve that More's lacks. Another seventeenth-century utopia that inflects More's founding model while indicating that built-in bias is Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World* (1666 and 1668), which waylays the genre for its author's own, very different purposes. Cavendish exalts the limited perspective that grows out of her own gendered, political experience, but elaborates that perspective into a "world" of its own in which only the one, controlling point of view is needed – the quintessential utopian condition.

Lazarillo de Tormes, on the other hand, is all limited perspective, according to which individual agents discuss as much of the social structure as they can perceive. It is all ideology in action, while *Utopia* is all critique of ideology. Other picaresques maintain this perspectival decorum even to the point of absurdity and unmanageability, as in Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1596), where the protagonist Jack Wilton – a name and a movable standpoint more than a character – visits much of western Europe and spans several generations of recent history, all through his relentlessly individual perspective. (Its furious energies are such that Nashe's fiction even rehearses the past and future of its medium and genre: many influential figures of European prose, such as Erasmus and More, make an appearance through Wilton's eyes, and at one point the loveblind Earl of Surrey undertakes a joust dressed as a proto-Quijote, "his helmet round proportioned lyke a gardners water-pot" that actually pours water[14] – a striking anticipation by ten years of Cervantes's Helmet of Mambrino, formerly a barber's brass basin.) The result is that most picaresques come off as socially versatile but unable to deal critically with ideology in its largest sense ("formally open but ideologically closed," as Claudio Guillén has it[15]), while the monologic utopias become implements for opening questions of ideology in that same sense (formally closed but ideologically open). One of the intriguing propositions that clings to *Utopia* and *Lazarillo de Tormes* as contemporaneous, originary texts is that early modern prose fiction is

born in the enactment of these two paradigmatic imperatives of critical theory, whose integration in a single analysis is one of the perennial challenges of such a theory; and that early modern prose makes the whole of which single genres or texts are merely fragments, albeit with their distinctive roles to carry out. Picaresque is not a term in critical theory, nor should it be as such. But putting it back into a reciprocal relation with utopia indicates that there might be much more to say about how these genres collaborate on a vision of society than what the genre critics and scholars of national literatures have observed.

The complementary essays in this volume by Rolena Adorno, Timothy Hampton, and Stephanie Jed make a similar demonstration: that the fact of the New World is engaged by the collaborating prose genres of history, essay, relación, and romance as well as the kinds of writing that Jed describes as "everyday" (letters, reports, and the like), so that it seldom suffices to read one of these without considering its interlocking alternatives. How much can we understand of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (1535) without treating his chivalric romance *Don Claribalte* (1519) and his prosimetric *Quinquagenas* (written 1546–56)? How can one evaluate Bernal Díaz's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (written 1550–84, published 1632) without recourse to the humanist and legal models that he (in Adorno's phrase, a "proto-historian") joined to the established relación of conquest? The essay by Ronald W. Sousa shows persuasively how a single prose text can accommodate a literally unsettling array of perspectives, and defeat our attempts to bring it under the control of received approaches – until we answer the conditions it sets down by proposing a term such as Sousa's *peirai*. Sousa offers this term for the predicates, standing in turn for deep-laid discursive currents, that may figure in a given text, mediating between its first person and its represented world. He implicitly shows the perils of importing into early modern prose even a commonplace of the present-day critical establishment such as the subject-position, which is often assumed to carry a great deal of force and import. Where subjects are largely filled out by their predicates, where the world often appears to narrate the "I," even the subject and its positions represent merely one set of factors among many against which one can orient a reading of early modern prose. It may be that *peirai* and their associated effects are more reliable tools in that area than other terms that come to hand more readily.

The innovations of the period were tremendous in poetry and drama, but it is in prose that writers forged religious reforms, radicalized natural and political philosophy, and practiced new ways of thinking about language and the categories of knowledge itself. Prose itself, of course,

was reengineered according to these evolving uses over time. Kinds of writing were flexible, searching, hybrid – their forms expanded in an unprecedented way under the impetus of print technology and the vernacularization of knowledge. With the general European turn to the vernacular at the end of the Latin Middle Ages, the textual culture of the early modern period became both less elite and less universal; the increasing dominance of the vernacular languages restricted international textual production and dissemination, but accommodated increased participation in the production of writing and reading by a variety of social classes. As most of the essays here indicate, a renovation of perspectives was fostered in many early modern texts by a recognition of cultural differences and a reconsideration of linguistic and literary theory under the pressure of the incipient nationalisms. Historians have amply discussed the overlapping roles of the Reformation, of social and economic changes, and of concomitant shifts in intellectual paradigms in defining the period. This cycle of events encouraged anthropological theory, provided fresh analogies for the problems of war, government, trade, and technology, and enabled the rise of cohorts of men and women such as the class of culture brokers to which Amerigo Vespucci, Walter Ralegh, and the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega belong, or the chain of utopian thinkers that includes Francis Bacon, Tommaso Campanella, and Margaret Cavendish. This is a climate that, not incidentally, created the conditions for an explosion of prose fiction.

More than issues of the literary or generic character of prose, it has been the question of its disciplinarity that has been most obscured by the increased segregation of later prose into specialized, and finally vocational, disciplines. In effect, the modern constitution of the disciplines has made many early modern categories, interconnections and strategies of writing prose opaque and perhaps nearly unthinkable. Different modern disciplines often study the same texts, yet this coincidence has not prevented a general ignorance of a multitude of resistant or complicated texts, and in fact has tended to isolate rather than enrich and complicate the various single approaches to the popular texts. For instance, Bacon's legal and scientific thought share programs and paradigms that are impoverished by separation, but few scholars now train themselves to be capable of understanding the interaction of these fields.

In this volume, we assume that to be able to evaluate early modern prose one must acknowledge but finally look past the horizons that the disciplines have traditionally maintained. It is not that anyone here is trying to escape disciplinary orders merely for the sake of expanding an audience, or even that these distinguished scholars, who represent some of the most invigorating developments in their respective fields, could