

DANIEL TYLER  
Introduction

This book is an introduction to the craft of prose; intended for readers and writers alike, it investigates and demonstrates the attributes and techniques available to prose writing. The contributors first examine the constituent parts of prose through a widening lens, from the smallest details of punctuation and wording to style, more broadly conceived. We then consider the way these different aspects of prose are put to use in different genres of writing, covering prose fiction and creative non-fiction too. Genres are usually understood in terms of their plots, characters and tropes, but we sample them at the level of the sentence in order to ascertain characteristic or even definitive techniques and styles. The team of contributors gathered here comprises scholars and critic-novelists, each practised in the art of reading prose in a writerly fashion. Each chapter is a critical essay in its own right and provides readers and writers with critical and conceptual tools with which to understand the workings of prose.

Prose these days rarely attracts this kind of attention (there are far fewer handbooks of this sort for prose than for poetry). Literary scholarship often turns its searching gaze towards larger cultural and political trends, towards histories of thought and belief. The implications of literary form and structure may be assessed in these projects, but the details of prose style are more likely to be considered incidental or in passing. In these circumstances, creative writers may find in literary scholarship less that is applicable to their craft than need be the case; but a truly practical criticism responds to the language, style and techniques of prose writing in ways that are illuminating to the practising writer.

The alert scrutiny in the pages that follow to the artistry of prose comes more readily to the study of poetry, since poetry more often wears its art on its sleeve; rhyme, rhyme schemes, metre and so on, all declare that we are in the presence of artistic technique, that there is a concentration of language that will repay a concentration of the enquiring mind. Prose can seem more ordinary than poetry, more everyday and ready-to-hand.

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The history of prose is a history of the ongoing absorption of idioms, dialects and patois – coming closer, broadly speaking, to the language and syntax of everyday talk. For many writers, this will be felt a limitation as well as an opportunity. Robert Louis Stevenson notes that the material in which the literary artist works is ‘the dialect of life’: by contrast with the unique materials of the other arts, ‘literature alone is condemned to work in mosaic with finite and quite rigid words [...] the acknowledged currency of our daily affairs’.<sup>1</sup> Prose can therefore seem unexceptional, too familiar to warrant much regard, too ordinary to merit the scrutiny given to the comparably high artifice of verse.

The status of prose as inferior to verse enters into our language in words like ‘prosy’ (*OED* sense 2: talking, writing, or (in extended use) behaving in a commonplace, dull or tedious way) or ‘prosaic’ (*OED* sense 2b: unpoetic, unromantic; dull, flat, unexciting; commonplace, mundane). Jane Austen takes a risk when she allows her heroine, Emma, to describe the voluble Miss Bates as ‘so silly—so satisfied—so smiling—so *prosing*—so undistinguished and unfastidious’ (my italics) because in doing so she threatens to impugn her own art.<sup>2</sup> Both before and after Austen’s day, prose has been associated (and has associated itself) with the prosaic and the prosing; it has been the appropriate medium through which to address ‘undistinguished’ subjects. Ever since the novel started to vie with poetry as the pre-eminent literary medium, this differentiation between poetry and prose has shaped the way that writers have thought about their work, whether the result is for them to confound or sharpen the distinction between these forms. In 1853, the poet Arthur Hugh Clough describes the ordinary affairs of daily business and then judged that, among the wider public, ‘the modern novel is preferred to the modern poem, because we do here feel an attempt to include these indispensable latest addenda—these phenomena which, if we forget on Sunday, we must remember on Monday—these positive matters of fact, which people, who are not verse-writers, are obliged to have to do with.’<sup>3</sup> The commitment to ‘these positive matters of fact’ will be felt at every level of prose, including diction and syntax (just as Clough’s readiness to end his sentence with a preposition in defiance of traditional rules of grammar and rhetoric suggests a relaxation of his prose towards the spoken and the ordinary). But if prose threatens to be humdrum by its very nature, that is also its gift, and, as writers like Clough have recognised, the capacity of prose to address commonplace things is the mainspring of its profound force and application.

G. W. F. Hegel finds the distinction between prose and poetry to be conceptually productive in his *Aesthetic Lectures*, delivered in the 1820s, published posthumously in 1835. In his dissertation on the ideal of beauty in

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relation to the finite world, Hegel uses the term ‘prose’ predominantly figuratively to refer to the finite and contingent world that constrains the freedom of the individual. Hegel writes, ‘This is the prose of the world . . . — a world of finitude and mutability, of entanglement in the relative, of the pressure of necessity from which the individual is in no position to withdraw.’<sup>4</sup> The phrase ‘the prose of the world’ is a suggestive one; it is more than a shorthand for ‘the ordinariness of the world’ because it captures the ability of prose to represent the world in its demanding complexity by recognising the inherited rules and chancy contingencies of language that curtail authorial freedom and make prose writing analogous to constrained human existence. The chapters in this volume explore the power of prose to represent human existence in the difficult conditions of a sometimes inhospitable world. All the arts of prose may be mobilised in pursuit of such a task. Hegel’s phrase acknowledges that in a deep sense, prose not only describes the world but models it as well. It is a stimulating vision of what prose can do, and it recognises that freighted diction and syntax, along with all the other qualities of prose, warrant our close attention.

Yet, there is an enduring habit among readers (academic and not) of paying minimal regard to the formal qualities of prose style, lulled by its ordinariness and perceived artlessness. This familiar view is often accompanied by the belief that the best prose is the most lucid, that its function above all other things is to communicate as clearly as possible, and that it will therefore strive to conceal its own mediating operations. Richard Lanham points to a long American tradition of believing that words ‘ought to evaporate entirely, constitute the ideal transparent medium for meaning’.<sup>5</sup> As Michael Hurley points out later in this volume, the virtues of clarity and lucidity continue to be prized with unexamined exclusivity in the latest manuals of style.<sup>6</sup> For some kinds of writing, clarity may well be a paramount consideration; this has been thought to include realist prose fiction. For example, Victorian writer Annie Matheson says of the prose of *Adam Bede*, ‘it may be said to have attained to that highest perfection which effaces itself, so that the reader forgets there is any medium at all.’<sup>7</sup> Her American contemporary, John Burroughs, writes that ‘[w]ords are like lenses,—they must be arranged in just such a way, or they hinder rather than help the vision. When the adjustment is as it should be, the lens itself is invisible; and language in the hands of the master is as transparent.’<sup>8</sup> The invisibility of prose has continued to seem to be the ambition of some writers. As Dennis Walder notes in a book on realism, ‘prose is a form of language that does not draw attention to itself to the degree we expect of poetry, and so tends to be thought of as a more “transparent” medium.’<sup>9</sup> His circumspect quotation marks reflect the numerous qualifications and critiques of this view that have

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been levelled throughout its long history of two hundred years or more. Nevertheless, the desirable transparency of prose remains a recognisable and sometimes still cherished ideal.

The dream of a prose that effaces itself has been influentially espoused in twentieth-century philosophy. Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, notes that native speakers are not usually conscious of their grammar and syntax, so he discerns a ‘self-forgetfulness of language’, whereby language’s ‘real being consists in what is said in it’.<sup>10</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre makes similar claims, and so does the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who borrows Hegel’s phrase for his unfinished book *The Prose of the World* (wr. 1951, publ. 1969, in English 1973).<sup>11</sup> Taking his cue from Hegel, Merleau-Ponty promises in the ensuing philosophy of language to ‘elaborate the category of prose beyond the confines of literature to give it a socio-logical meaning’.<sup>12</sup> The risk involved in the extension of the idea of prose into non-verbal domains is that the linguistic specificity of prose is lost, and, sure enough, Merleau-Ponty declares, ‘In the way it works, language hides itself from us. Its triumph is to efface itself and to take us beyond the words to the author’s very thoughts, so that we imagine we are engaged with him in a wordless meeting of minds.’<sup>13</sup>

The kind of attention that allows us to think of prose as ‘wordless’ is not likely to be productive for either the critic aiming to gauge effects or the writer seeking to emulate them. It is worth reiterating that for all its appearance of unstudied fluency, prose may well be carefully crafted, even if that is with the art that conceals itself. Gustave Flaubert is renowned for the laborious craftsmanship of his prose, and his reflections on the process testify to the inseparable relations of wording and meaning: ‘The finer the idea, be sure, the finer-sounding the sentence. The exactness of the thought makes for (and is itself) that of the word.’<sup>14</sup> Prose may, of course, be purposefully self-advertising or self-regarding rather than self-effacing. At the level of diction, an unusual word may supply a verbal surprise that draws our attention to the medium of expression. Throughout this volume, we go on to note contortions of syntax, impactful paragraphing, ostentatious chapter divisions, dramatic shifts of perspective, and many more features by which prose works, whether or not there is any attempt to naturalise them or conceal them from readers. Since prose techniques are no less constitutive of a passage’s meaning than are the formal features of poetry, it is necessary to raise into visibility and to sharpen conceptually the technical and rhetorical qualities of effective prose against any tendency to overlook them.

This book offers itself as a corrective to the principle that prose is best when it conceals itself, but it does much more than this because it aims to

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stimulate attention to the formal features of prose where that kind of attention has been stifled by assumptions about its transparency. Even when the principle is accepted that prose always mediates its meaning, there is still a sparsity of examples of how to attend to prose in detail – and not just through the application of technical terms but so as to elucidate effects from quoted instance to quoted instance. A volume like this can *train* a reader's vision in a double sense – both focus it on the prose at hand and exercise it so that it is better prepared, having had the workout, for future encounters. Recognising the techniques and qualities of prose in given instances will revitalise the responses of readers, and it will stimulate or provoke regard for language and technique in the responding writer. Zadie Smith points out that it is not easy 'to confront the fact that for many writers there will be paragraphs, whole characters, whole books through which one sleepwalks' (her phrasing conflates the somnambulance of writer and reader), so this book is an attempt to prompt readers and writers to the kind of vital perception that the best writing itself achieves.<sup>15</sup> Whether the result is to sharpen critical or creative faculties (faculties that are never so neatly partitioned as that split categorisation suggests), it will have been achieved in the face of an all-too-frequently slumbering attention to prose technique.

To return to the dismissal of Miss Bates by Jane Austen's *Emma* ('so silly—so satisfied—so smiling—so prosing—so undistinguished and unfastidious'), we can begin to see the achieved qualities of prose even when descriptive of those who are merely prosing. The word 'prosing' provides a hinge between the alliterative and the negative adjectives, as if to secure by itself the formal organisation of the claim, for, in fact, Austen's writing here shows some of the careful exactitude that makes her prose a fine art. The language is delicately controlled. The wording strikes a balance between our perceptions of both *Emma*'s criticism and Miss Bates's good-hearted nature: Miss Bates is accused of being 'satisfied', though it is not clear it is better to be 'unsatisfied'; she is 'unfastidious' when that is another of those words whose significance depends largely upon context and behaviour, as it does when (in an earlier novel) Bingley laments that Darcy is 'fastidious' or when the narrative voice calls him 'haughty, reserved, fastidious', a condemnation that only later turns out to have contained all along a recognition of his virtues, seen from an unfavourable angle.<sup>16</sup> This prose fragment is also, of course, situated in a particular plot, and the local circumstances affect and are affected by the language here. *Emma* has just been told by Harriet that if she does not marry, she will end up like Miss Bates, so the flurry of critical adjectives is touched with the heat of self-defence (a vigour suggested through the strained syntax as the sentence approximates a list). Miss Bates is a simple, faithful, vulnerable friend, and *Emma*'s protestations reveal

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as much about herself as her subject. This run of terms, rattled off with the efficiency of a thesaurus entry, threatens after all to furnish another comparison between Emma and Miss Bates: not only are they both ‘unmarried’, but also they are comparably garrulous. Germaine Greer has suggested that ‘[i]t is unlikely, if we read *Emma* by Jane Austen, that we even remember Miss Bates.’<sup>17</sup> The proposition is more unlikely than the forgetful reading it imagines (since Emma’s dismissal of Miss Bates is central to her moral development and, too, her romantic progress), but it at least nicely reinscribes for the prosy character the alleged forgettability of prose wording itself; Miss Bates is as unassuming as prose.

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Part I of this book, *Parts of Prose*, moves, chapter by chapter, from features of prose as small as marks of punctuation through to the category constituted by all the preceding features: style. Although marks of punctuation are the most granular elements of style considered here, Bharat Tandon’s chapter shows that they are continuous with the much larger forms of punctuation that interrupt human experiences in time and space, especially ‘larger relations of voice and body, space and absence’.

It is equally tricky to isolate words from their larger contexts in phrases and sentences (let alone plots), as Garrett Stewart’s chapter shows. Words are activated by syntax, and as they pass into phrases, style emerges from the unpredictable influence of their scriptive, acoustic and etymological qualities. The chapter on words shows that even when mimicking worn-out, hackneyed speech styles, the vitality of creative language use can rescue wording from those atmospheres – of marketing and of politicking, for example – where language has become tired and predictable, as if from the tendency of its own prose medium towards the ordinary and the usual.

My chapter on sentences shows that the relations made possible by syntax between wording and timing, sequence and consequence, experience and reflection, create an unlimited range of possible effects at the level of the sentence. The chapter explores some of these effects, noting particularly the presence of competing impulses in single sentences, so that any sentence is a negotiation between rival forces and, in its fullest implication, a representation of the mixed conditions of human existence.

Sentences in prose are usually organised into paragraphs, and a paragraph offers itself as another ‘expressive device’. Jenny Davidson’s chapter draws on a history of paragraphs (which are alternatively linked to oral delivery and to logical organisation) and shows how paragraphs can contribute to various effects of expression, including tonal control.

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James Williams shows that chapters, too, are ‘a form of punctuation’, and so they structure our experience of time in reading novels whilst also offering interventions into our understanding of time in the rest of our lives. The chapter on chapters tracks the history of this principle of narrative organisation as well as various playful attempts to test or defy its conventional limits, showing that chapter division is itself a stylistic device.

The management of perspective in narrative fiction is so much a matter of technique at the level of the sentence, involving diction, syntax and punctuation, that it merits consideration here, among the parts of prose. Ruth Bernard Yeazell distinguishes different varieties of perspective available in fiction (third-person, first-person and free indirect style) and shows how they work in practice. Her suggestion that the familiar but misleading concept of the ‘omniscient narrator’ emerges from ‘confusing the power theoretically open to novelists from the actual behavior of novelists’ neatly indicates the benefits of attending to examples of prose in practice, which this *Companion* does throughout, instead of discussing these techniques predominantly in the abstract.

As I have suggested, these various aspects of prose all amount to features of style; so the scaling sequence of prose parts comes to rest on the category of style. Michael D. Hurley’s chapter considers the many applications of the concept of style and pursues its historical fortunes across a range of writers. Although style has been variously configured and refigured, what is apparent is that the ideal of clarity, so frequently promoted by style guides and other textbooks, is not the only objective of style, especially not in the literary fiction and non-fiction considered in this book.

The parts of prose laid out for inspection in these chapters provide a toolkit for readers seeking to engage closely with the inner workings of prose and for writers seeking to emulate any of the effects and techniques paraded here. In practice, of course, these parts of prose do not operate in isolation – neither in isolation from each other, nor from genre. Part II of the book, *Prose Genres*, delivers a series of chapters reflecting on the operations of prose within the habitual conditions of certain kinds of prose writing, including both fiction and creative non-fiction. Each chapter considers the way that exemplary writing in a given genre marshals multiple aspects of prose style to strategic ends. Each chapter looks at habitual prose techniques in the history of particular genres: styles of punctuation, say, habits of diction, organisation of sentences, and so on, that come to seem common to the genre. At their farthest reach, these investigations suggest that genre can be read at the level of the sentence (and not only in terms of plots and tropes), and even that there are prose styles and techniques native to certain genres.

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Part II begins with realist prose. Realism is the genre – if it is a genre, and not something more comprehensive, like a mode – most likely to claim the illusion of transparency in a bid to conceal its own linguistic texture. James Wood’s chapter discusses a grammar of realism that calls upon a variety of prose strategies, including the management of time effects and the presence of abundant or telling detail, to show what is at stake in realist writing and how much happens in the prose despite its alleged retreat from artifice. Although realism has found itself assailed periodically, often for its artifice, this chapter testifies to the enduring value of realist prose whilst offering insights into its evolution.

Comic prose has much in common with other genres and styles; timing and balance, for example, are integral to its effects. Jonathan Greenberg and David Galef offer an examination of many different techniques in comic writing that build upon and depart from familiar strategies, many of them relying on upending expectations. The chapter enumerates various techniques, including reversal, elaboration, soundplay, excess (and restraint) and parody.

Alison Milbank’s chapter on gothic prose, ranging from Ann Radcliffe in the late eighteenth century to contemporary gothic, shows how often language in these works verges on the inexpressible, reminding us that our rational understanding of human experience may only be partial. Language that superanimates the natural world, the frequent use of em dashes that gesture towards the unsaid, even the unsayable, grotesque and arabesque styles, and equivocal, combinatory techniques are all mobilised to create a set of effects that test the limits of our capacity for understanding.

The rival attractions of plain and excessive styles apparent in realism, comedy and the gothic are equally significant in science fiction writing, and Adam Roberts identifies this opposition as a distinguishing feature in the history of science fiction. The chapter considers the rival origins of the genre in the works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells and offers a comprehensive survey of twentieth- and twenty-first-century traditions. Roberts tracks the history of a pared-down, plain style that often runs counter to the excess and scientific detail of the content, setting it alongside a competing, more ambitious ‘literary’ prose style that has increasingly come into the ascendancy.

In travel writing, the competition between the plain and the excessive overlaps with a tension between the familiar and the exotic, a tension felt within individual works and not just in demarcating different traditions. Roslyn Jolly’s chapter discusses the particular burden carried by the prose of the travel writer, who will often need to render a foreign scene strange and exotic whilst bestowing it with an air of authenticity and verisimilitude.



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In doing so, it is characteristic for the travel writer to appeal to the senses and to exercise telling control or choice of narrative perspective. These various pressures and strategies appear fairly consistently throughout the long history of travel writing, sampled here in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Henry James, Robert Louis Stevenson, George Orwell and Jonathan Raban. These strategies transfer into prose fiction on occasions when it is influenced by the travel memoir or tourist guide.

Nature writing, too, is susceptible to stylistic excess, and the genre has been parodied for what Richard Kerridge identifies as ‘purple prose’. Given the remarkable resurgence of the popularity of nature writing in the first decades of this century, this chapter considers how nature writers now can develop a prose style that avoids the excesses traditionally associated with the genre and that will face up to and not shrink from the threats to nature, including ‘global warming and the huge loss of wildlife populations’, that demand perspectival shifts between the local and the global, the personal and the planetary.

Like travel writing and nature writing, life writing can pass from a distinct genre of its own into prose fiction. Whether in biography, the biographical novel, the memoir or various other subgenres of life writing, the writer must be responsibly committed to both truth and imagination, to both fact and fiction. Jay Parini’s chapter considers a wide range of life writing and observes the various priorities afforded to truth and imagination in the work. Whatever access to archives, testimonies and evidence life writers need, they need, above all, in Parini’s phrase, ‘access to the resources of language’.<sup>18</sup> Whether for the life writer, or the writer of any other creative non-fiction or fiction, that is what this book aims to facilitate.

## NOTES

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- 2 J. Austen, *Emma* [1815], ed. J. Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 68.
- 3 A. H. Clough, ‘Review of Some Poems by Alexander Smith and Matthew Arnold’, in *The Poems and Prose Remains of Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. B. S. Clough (London: Macmillan, 1869), 359–83, 361.
- 4 *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 150.
- 5 R. Lanham, *Analyzing Prose* (London: Continuum, 1983, 2003), xv.
- 6 See Chapter 6.
- 7 A. Matheson, ‘In Praise of Adam Bede’, in *Leaves of Prose, with Two Studies by May Sinclair*, ed. Annie Matheson (London: Stephen Swift, 1912), 274–82, 281.

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- 8 J. Burroughs, 'Style and the Man', in *Literary Values and Other Papers* (London: Gay and Bird, 1903), 59–88, 74.
- 9 D. Walder, *The Realist Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995, 2005), 10.
- 10 H.-G. Gadamer, 'Man and Language' [1966], in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. D. E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 59–68, 65.
- 11 J.-P. Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, trans. B. Frechtman (London: Methuen, 1967); M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. C. Lefort, trans. J. O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
- 12 Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, xiii.
- 13 Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 10.
- 14 G. Flaubert, 'Letter to Mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantepie', 12 December 1857, quoted in M. Allott, *Novelists on the Novel* (London: Routledge, 1968), 314.
- 15 Z. Smith, 'Fail Better', in *The Writer's Reader: Vocation, Preparation, Creation*, eds. R. Cohen and J. Parini (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 357.
- 16 J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* [1813], ed. J. Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7, 11.
- 17 G. Greer, *The Change: Women, Aging, and Menopause* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1991), 21.
- 18 See Chapter 14.