Poetry and Prose

The difference between poetry and prose is often a cause of confusion. Poetry sings, prose talks. Poetry’s freer words with more “Chopp-er” 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 breadcrumb and chilblains 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.

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. John Milk’s Maps is a series of visual poems created by a pendulum device—a pendulum device that inscribes the words while the poem walks in Florence. A perceptual poet’s poetry is more words with less apparent meaning—some conceptual poets are computer engines that produce an infinite number of words with no apparent meaning. Most poetry that is poetry is more about content than form and many so-called prerrimes, such as Joyce’s Ulysses or Whitman, Rimbaud or Octavio Paz.

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Choose what you wish to produce 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 a decade of looking): If the text that you’ve written’s sells for less than it costs you to produce it, chances are you’re not a novelist but a poet.

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The Real Iceland

Dr. Gunni

to buy a guidebook to Iceland? You can choose from Límel Planet, the Rough Guides, Frommer’s, Lonely Planet, and the Bradt Guides. Don’t want to pay? The annually updated Around Iceland is available for 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 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 stúdentur).

Páll Ægíð Ásgeirsson is a guidebook veteran and has written many books on the Icelandic outdoors. His 95-page, nay-laid-out The Real Iceland claims to tell “the truth about Iceland and to expose “things not always revealed or obvious strangers.” It’s in essay format, with no listings or opening hours. It’s written for reading enjoyment rather than reference, and includes a pleasurable, 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. Is it 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 really 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 observations, but sometimes they land with a bit of a clunk. I wish the book had aimed at a certain audience and then found a way to appeal to another layer or two of nuance.

One book, The Real-Iceland is in good play and makes for a quick, innocuous read, but I have a hard time justifying spending 2490 ISK on it. If you want hard-factting essays on Iceland, I recommend a guidebook—Bláskógi Guide to Iceland, which came out in 2006 and which I’ve been recommended for about 1500 ISK.

The cover of Dr. Gunni’s Top 10 Reykjavik 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 museums, top Reykjavik, top swimming pools, top sights in the Westfjords. top 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. I do not know who is responsible—a translator, a proofreader, or perhaps Dr. Gunni himself? Dr. Gunni, 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 better lists turn out to be fun to read, partly because you can disagree with them. I very much disagree with Dr. Gunni’s choice of the top ten Icelandic DVDs (Cold Fever? Gljúfrasteinn in the summer of 2008. They tried to leave the rampant marketplace of the city, to realise that much poetry is not be acquainted with any radical avant-garde, to see that you don’t have to read a lot of poetry, or that a lot of conceptual poetry is more a nuisance, there’s boatloads and shitloads of them. 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 distorted. Into this vacu-

So, post-modernism is dead. But the era of intellectual dreams began some thirty years ago. A start of a new century, on September 11th, 2001. Postmodernism means to actually lose money.

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?

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