

Almanach des Muses vs. Almanach des Prosateurs: The Economics of Poetry and Prose at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century

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How to understand French eighteenth-century poetry? Unlike previous and succeeding centuries, which reveal a series of celebrated, accomplished poets, the French Enlightenment seems today the poor relative exiled from poetry's pantheon. The rapid development of prose during the eighteenth century forces our attention almost exclusively upon theater, fiction, and non-fiction. Among the quartet of philosophers, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot, only Voltaire wholeheartedly embraced poetry, and was revered by his century as its immortal poet laureate, and yet Voltaire, author of philosophical tales and virulent pamphlets, has long eclipsed Voltaire the epic poet. If novelists and dramatists such as Laclos, Prevost, Marivaux, or Beaumarchais attract non-specialists, this is not the case with Rousseau's namesake (Jean-Baptiste), Racine's son (Louis), Bernis, Saint-Lambert, Le Brun-Pindare, Dorat, Delille, or Parny, to name but a few celebrated contemporary poets. Winning philosophically and aesthetically, eighteenth-century prose eventually tipped the scales, as poetry seemed to lose its density—notwithstanding its prominence at the time.

Two recent anthologies have sought to remedy this imbalance and fully represent French eighteenth-century poetry.¹ The importance of these collections must be underscored: it is no longer possible to view the eighteenth century as a poetic eclipse or lament the limited access to sources. In their respective prefaces and notes, Michel Delon and Catriona Seth rehabilitate more than individual poets or poems but the whole poetic enterprise of the French eighteenth-century, teasing out from its practice theoretical ambitions, aesthetic entanglements, metaphysical and scientific explorations, religious, urbane, or profane inspirations. Both introductions also explain what might otherwise pass for anomalies or editorial quirks: the presence of prose among the poems selected. Whereas nineteenth-century free verse and prose poems have long achieved poetic legitimacy, this is not the case with the eclectic, non-versified selections hand-picked by each editor for his/her eighteenth-century collection: neither contemporary nor modern critics agree on their status or name. What is the meaning, therefore, of the special privilege granted to these prose compositions inserted in recent reference anthologies, including the prestigious *Pléiade*? They highlight the interaction between prose and poetry during the Enlightenment, a dynamic too often negated by the customary acceptance of hermetic boundaries between the two, and by the presumption in favor of prose's qualitative and quantitative superiority in the age of Reason.

The examples included in our two modern anthologies expose several modes of competition between the prose and verse of eighteenth-century France. To contextualize this phenomenon, however, one needs to return to the field. The objective is to follow a thread distinct from the lyricism that Seth justly identifies in the eighteenth century's poetic labyrinth (1261). Indeed, prose and poetry were also commercial affairs, with

¹ Michel Delon published his *Anthologie de la poésie française du XVIIIe siècle* in 1997. Catriona Seth has selected, prefaced, and annotated the section on eighteenth-century poetry in the 2000 *Pléiade Anthologie de la poésie française, XVIIIe siècle, XIXe siècle, XXe siècle*. Previous notable anthologies of eighteenth-century poetry include Maurice Allem's *Anthologie poétique, XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Garnier, 1919, Garnier-Flammarion 1966), Pierre Oster's *Anthologie de la poésie française au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Tchou, 1969), Simone Chevallier's *La Poésie française au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Larousse, 1974), and Robert Sabatier's *Histoire de la poésie française, la poésie du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1975).

markets to conquer or share. How to represent the “economics” of prose and poetry in the Enlightenment, i.e. their production, distribution, and consumption? To expose preconceptions about the demise of poetry and the legitimacy of prose, I propose in the second part of this essay a comparative analysis of the famous *Almanach des Muses* and the short-lived *Almanach des Prosateurs*, two collections of contemporary verse and prose—the annual anthologies of their time.

Prose and Verse

Editors of each of the Gallimard anthologies canvassed the poetic field, chose symptomatic poems along with some personal favorites, and included a few hybrid prose compositions. Partly or fully written in prose, these diverse pieces (a combined total of nineteen) account for a small percentage of the collections, yet they help highlight the two most representative interactions between the modes of prose and poetry: integration (resulting in a composite of verse and prose) and assimilation (proffering a synthesis).

Typical of the first trend are letters interspersed with verse: here the choice of editors converged in selecting letters describing landscapes where the passage from prose to verse signals the effort to translate nature’s beauty into poetic elevation.² Paralleling the popularity of travel narratives and the appetite for exotic or sublime locales, descriptive letters could juggle with genre codes to convey better the shock of the unfamiliar. Creole poets (Bertin, Parny, Leonard, and Campenon), all travelers, seemed to have had a particular affinity with this epistolary style. The second convergence of verse and prose featured by each anthology appears in the curious oeuvre of Jean-Marie Chassignon (1735-1795), a proto-Lautréamont whose idiosyncratic style defies all classification.³ In addition Seth included in her *Pléiade* another confluence between prose and verse, namely versified didactic or descriptive poems augmented by long and detailed notes in prose at the bottom of each page.⁴ While such division of labor between verse, the language of inspiration, and prose, reserved to exegesis, suggests a traditional reciprocity, the prose commentary in effect competes with and threatens verse unable to synthesize the totality of experience.⁵

The assimilationist model is illustrated by two essential eighteenth-century texts common to each anthology: Évariste Parny’s 1787 *Chansons Madécasses* and Louis Claude de Saint Martin’s 1790 *L’Homme de désir*.⁶ Parny’s musical lyricism and Saint Martin’s spiritual poetic quest opened paths to their romantic followers. Delon’s pocket anthology presents one additional prose cameo assimilating poetic features: Nicolas de Bonneville’s “Le Poète” is a short, self-reflexive poem carefully structured with repetitions and parallelisms, which anticipates the self-referential, self-contained nature characteristic of modern prose poems (382).⁷ For its part, Seth’s *Pléiade* anthology

² Half of Delon’s selection of hybrid prose compositions belongs to this category, a reflection of the eighteenth century as “la grande époque du voyage en vers et en prose.” Preface, 23.

³ As Delon nicely remarks, Chassignon’s works “excèdent la littérature.” Witness *Cataractes de l’imagination, déluge de la scribomanie, vomissement littéraire, hémorragie encyclopédique, monstre des monstres, par Épiménide l’inspiré. Dans l’Antre de Trophonius, au pays des Visions* (Delon 245-53, 462-3. Seth 218-20).

⁴ Louis Racine’s “La Religion” (60-3), Jacques Delille’s “Les Jardins ou l’art d’embellir les paysages” (231-3), Sade’s “La Vérité” (256-61), Antoine Roucher’s “Janvier” (280-5), Augustin de Piis’s “Harmonie imitative de la langue française” (358-63).

⁵ The same is true of poems with exotic or scientific vocabulary defined in notes: “La note en prose vient souligner la contradiction entre une ambition et des moyens, entre un rêve et une réalité linguistique ou sociale. Le commentaire en prose devient nécessaire à la compréhension de vers qui menacent de ne plus se suffire à eux-mêmes, de vers qui sont discrédités dans leur volonté même de traduire un savoir moderne” (Delon 18).

⁶ Delon 297-300 and 350-3. Seth 264-6 and 334-43.

⁷ Although Delon does not focus on prose as the language uniting Parny, Saint Martin, and Bonneville, it is striking, and not coincidental, that his preface should end on these three poets’ newfound inspiration and formal innovations (29-31).

incorporates three more symptomatic prose texts: a) a psalm by Sylvain Maréchal, an important reminder that the poetry of the Bible stood at the horizon of prose poets (297-8); b) an excerpt from Louis-François Jauffret’s 1791 best-seller *Les charmes de l’enfance et les plaisirs de l’amour maternel*, which sought the simplicity and naiveté of Greek idylls in casting mothers and children in lieu of shepherds (426-8); c) an imitation of Ossian by Diderot, “Connal et Crimora” (135-6). Although more debatable (attribution to Diderot is uncertain), the latter insertion has the merit of presenting two more important aspects in the assimilation between prose and poetry: firstly, translation/imitation often served as a vehicle for non-versified poems. Secondly, the Ossianic myth, when it reached France, matched the poetic aspiration of those wishing to reform neo-classical poetry and allow for non-versified, albeit rhythmic, poems.

What happens when the above prose compositions are returned to their literary and historical context? Writing poetic texts in prose, and creatively mingling prose and verse clearly occurred in the second half of the century, as attempts to address dissatisfaction with contemporary poetics grew more persuasive. The ongoing debate about rejuvenating poetry and the role of versification, expressed in myriad contemporary treatises,⁸ is not absent from the anthologies under consideration. A few key poems concentrate on the fate of poetry and the poet’s grievances concerning verse.⁹ These auto-critical poems indict rhyme, strict symmetry, and the mechanics of versification. They lament the preeminence of reason over intuition, pitch “method and art” against “instinct and sentiment,” and long for lost harmony.¹⁰ When Parny, Saint Martin, Maréchal, or Jauffret adopted prose as an apt poetic medium, they were responding to the prevalent frustration by testing the uncharted waters of poetry in prose. If their prose seems prescient, in view of subsequent development in prose poetry and poetic prose, one should remember that they remained marginal cases within the massive poetic production of the French eighteenth century (reflected in the bulk of each anthology).¹¹

The retrospective gaze of anthology editors inevitably shapes the picture that emerges from this densely poetic century. Their diachronic approach identifies trends as well as symptoms, thus distilling a poetic aesthetic seemingly far removed from our post-romantic sensibilities. But how to correct the distorting perspective that elevates, and renders equal, certain authors, while hundreds more dwell in the shadow? How to replace in its context the emulation or competition between these poetic players? A synchronic study of the same poetic field helps to readjust focus. This is the purpose of comparing a poetic collection with a collection of “fugitive” prose. Neither exhaustive nor exclusive of other possible corpus, this approach delves into the *economics* of poetry and prose, literally as well as metaphorically.

The Venture of Almanacs

From the sixteenth to nineteenth century, almanacs of various allegiances offered not just an ornate calendar of days and dates, but a linguistic repository: prophecies and predictions in the 1600s; jokes, puns, histories, trade advice (whether it be for comedians, gardeners or craftsmen) until 1750; gallant pledges of love in the second half of the eighteenth century, propaganda during the Revolution, miscellany in the nineteenth century (Grand-Carteret xxii-lxxiv). Ephemeral by essence—almanacs of the new year

⁸ For an original presentation of eighteenth-century debates and discourses on poetry, see Roudaut. See also Ferenczi, Menant (47-111), and Seth’s introduction.

⁹ The most noteworthy are La Motte’s “Vers contre les vers” (43), Chabanon’s “Sur le sort de la poésie en ce siècle philosophe” (179-82), Dorat’s “La Poésie. Ode” (210-3), Parny’s “Dialogue entre un poète et sa muse” (343-6), Augustin de Piis’s “Harmonie imitative de la langue française” (358-63), and André Chénier’s “L’Invention. Poème” (380-4). Seth.

¹⁰ See Chabanon’s “Sur le sort de la poésie en ce siècle philosophe” (Delon 198-9).

¹¹ For a detailed history of “poèmes en prose” in eighteenth-century France, see Moore.

dislodged almanacs of the year past—they survived nevertheless, to the delight of iconographers and collectors. Their pocket-size format (in-32, in-24, in-18, in-16, in-12) made them daily companions and ideal new year's gifts. Almanacs faithfully mirrored the taste and preoccupation of their time, and were increasingly popular: from 90 titles in the seventeenth century, the inventory climbs to over 1,290 in the eighteenth-century, then to an astonishing 2,250 titles from 1801 to 1895. More precisely, publication exploded in the second half of the eighteenth century, from 92 titles between 1700 and 1750, to almost 1,200 from 1751 to 1800.¹² Zooming in on their content reveals an overwhelming number of "almanachs galants" with libertine accents (often collections of songs under the label "Etrennes"), and literary almanacs featuring a calendar and selected poems.¹³ The number of copies printed and their price reveal a dividing line between literary almanacs—from 1,000 to 2,500 copies of each title—and "petites Etrennes populaires, genre *Étrennes mignonnes*," with a printing ranging from 8,000 to 20,000 copies (Grand-Carteret cvii). Where two *sous* could buy a popular almanac, two *livres* was the more likely price of a poetic almanac.¹⁴ That literary almanacs were destined for wealthier, privileged customers is further confirmed by expensive printing and ornamental options: finer paper, more engravings, richer bindings of individual volumes and whole sets (in leather, silk or velvet), lockets, etc. Depending on craftsmanship, a single volume could fetch from four to twelve francs. The business of almanacs was therefore hugely lucrative.¹⁵

A brief presentation of each publication will first highlight their contrasting fates and opposing contents. The *Almanach des Muses* thrived from 1765 to 1833, spanning seventy years (minus a one-year interruption, in 1799), featuring approximately 1,550 authors and 9,500 poems (Lachèvre 111). This vast enterprise remained remarkably stable throughout the turmoil of a period ranging from Louis XV to Louis-Philippe, which included the Revolution, Terror, Directory, Empire, Louis XVIII, and Charles X (Lachèvre 111). It probably owed its survival and longevity to the dedication of its founder, Claude Sautereau de Marsy (1740-1815) who remained its editor until 1793, and his collaborator Etienne Vigée, who took over until his own death in 1820; two more editors presided over the last thirteen years.¹⁶ The collection's vantage point presents a unique perspective: its panoramic view of the French poetic landscape spreads from the last third of the eighteenth century to the first thirty-three years of the nineteenth century. Free from the arbitrary periodization of poetic anthologies, the succession of poems and authors accentuates continuities in style and topics. Rather than ruptures, sudden breakthroughs or radical innovations, a slow evolution takes place, a few new (later illustrious) voices emerge, mindful of tradition, amid a sea of known and unknown poets.¹⁷ This partly reflects the editors' conservative choice, no doubt, but it gives an

¹² These figures were compiled from the listings of Grand-Carteret's bibliography (1-692) and supplement (693-737).

¹³ For a concise study of the surge in politically oriented, Republican almanacs in the wake of 1789, see Andries.

¹⁴ The *Almanach des Muses* sold for 2 *livres* (some years one *livre* and 10 *sols*) and the *Almanach des Prosateurs* for 1 fr. 80 the first four years, and two francs during the last four.

¹⁵ For a critique of the commercial "manufacture" of almanacs and its financial profits, see Mercier's "Calendriers, almanachs pour janvier" (1994 2: 1531-4).

¹⁶ Justin Gensoul until 1829 and Jules Lesguillon until 1833 (Lachèvre 13).

¹⁷ The majority of French eighteenth-century poets were published during their career in the *Almanach des Muses*. One also discovers verses or poems from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Diderot, Frédéric II, Beaumarchais, Choderlos de Laclos, and Staël. Chateaubriand also submitted to the *Almanach* his first poems. After 1815, one comes across Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Alphonse de Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Charles Nodier, Alexandre Dumas, Gérard de Nerval, and Théophile Gautier. However, one should keep in mind that the number of recognizable names is a far cry from the huge quantity of unknown and/or one-time "versificateurs." See "Table des auteurs et de leurs pièces classées par années," and "Table du dépouillement

accurate picture of poetry's mainstream, of contemporary taste, and their development. To revisit this fount of poetry is to rediscover the existence of forgotten forms, the popularity of allegories, the ringing of obligatory rhymes, the range of poetic genres, the versatility of verse—notwithstanding constricting rules—and the enduring social prestige of composing verse, elements attenuated by the romantic wave, and discredited by post-romantic aesthetic judgment.

Numerous collections of "fugitive" poetry sought to capitalize on the commercial success of the *Almanach des Muses*,¹⁸ yet only one team launched a competing collection exclusively with "fugitive" prose, albeit thirty-five years later. In An X (1801), les C. C[itoyens] Fr[ançois] Noël "inspecteur général des études" and P[ierre] B[ernard] Lamare¹⁹ founded the *Almanach des Prosateurs, ou recueil de poésies fugitives, en prose* as a counter-part, the preface maintains, not a rival to the *Almanach des Muses*:

Les vers que l'on fait aujourd'hui sont en général fort bons; mais la Prose a aussi son mérite. Elle a, comme les Vers, ses Dorat, ses St.-Lambert, ses Parny, ses Boufflers. Nous possédons déjà un assez grand nombre de morceaux de prose légère dont nous composerons le premier volume de la collection; le Public éclairé nous aidera sans doute à composer les volumes suivans. [...]

Nous annonçons donc à tous les amis de la Littérature, que nous nous chargeons de recueillir et de publier tous les ans, dans un in-12 de 350 pages, même format à-peu-près que l'*Almanach des Muses*, toutes les jolies pièces en prose qu'on voudra nous adresser. Ce n'est pas que notre Almanach prétende à aucune rivalité avec l'autre; ce qui seroit une témérité. Mais pourquoi ne varierait-on pas les plaisirs du Public? La Prose n'est-elle pas sœur de la Poésie, et nos meilleurs versificateurs ne font-ils pas quelquefois de la Prose? C'est pour réunir et conserver cette portion intéressante de notre richesse littéraire, que nous avons songé à former l'*Almanach des Prosateurs*.²⁰

Beneath the modest claim of the *Almanach des Prosateurs* to vary the pleasures of its readers lurks the ambition to conquer part of poetry's turf, to gain for prose the same legitimacy as poetry. The stakes are commercial—capturing readership—as well as aesthetic—expanding genres.

As far as readership is concerned, an interesting contrast separates each collection. Lise Andries remarks that "such almanacs were intended for an aristocratic or wealthy clientele, no doubt predominantly female" (206).²¹ The increasing miniaturization and elaborate craftsmanship of the almanacs seems to confirm that they were destined for women's eyes and hands: engravings, precious leather and metal work, rich bindings, a tiny format worked to turn the almanac into an instrument of courtship, a tale-telling gift.²² As a result, titles became more and more explicit towards the end of the century,

des titres et premiers vers de quelques auteurs, particulièrement de 1810 à 1833" in Lachèvre 113-154 and 188-205.

¹⁸ Cf. *Almanach littéraire ou Etrennes d'Apollon* (1773-1793 and 1801-1806), *Almanach des Grâces* (1784-1795 and 1804-1807), *Nouvel Almanach des Muses* (1802-1813), etc.

¹⁹ François-Joseph Noël (1756-1841) was a philologist, a diplomat, and published numerous pedagogical works on various languages as well as a French-Latin dictionary. Pierre-Bernard Lamare (1753-1809) was also a diplomat, a translator of English and German, and one of the editors of the *Bibliothèque universelle des romans*. As Grand-Carteret notes, Noël alone edited the fourth year volume; the title pages of the fifth and sixth volumes bear no names, then the name of the scholar [Joseph Victor] Leclerc appears for the last two years (350).

²⁰ Preface. *Almanach des Prosateurs*. An X-1801. vi-vii. Henceforth referred to as AP, followed by volume and page number.

²¹ Some titles are explicitly directed at women, such as *Almanach des dames* (1802-1840) and *Petit Almanach des dames* (1811-1832). See Grand-Carteret, 359.

²² "Maintenant, dans tous les domaines, l'almanach est un petit livre précieux qui se donne aux belles dont on 'cultive la flamme'..." (Grand-Carteret xxxvi).

for instance, *Etrennes d'amour* and *Etrennes érotiques* (Grand-Carteret xxxviii). Further, most poems in the *Almanach des Muses* were dedicated to women, or written as compliments and personal homage. As in past centuries, verse remained a polite and fashionable way to communicate to women. By contrast, only two or three women authors are found in each volume of the *Almanach des Muses*, out of an average of one hundred contributors. What is the significance of this dichotomy between male producers and female receivers? A confirmation of gender roles, of the social obstacles to female literary power and authorship? Or the preservation of the men-only club of poetry's Pantheon that the *Almanach des Muses* represented for over three-quarters of a century? Ironically, the group of young male poets who conceived of and published the *Almanach des Muses* sprung from the first feminist periodical, the *Journal des Dames*. For two years its colorful, outspoken "éditrice," Mme de Beaumer, had aggressively promoted women's rights and freedom of expression. Running afoul of censors, she had to pass the torch to a more moderate and conciliatory Mme de Maisonnette, who ran the periodical from 1763 to 1769, and quieted its feminist voice by accepting contributions from "a large number of minor but prolific male writers." Subsequently "[n]early all the poems they wrote for the *Journal des Dames* served double duty in the annual *Almanach des muses*. This, clearly, was a very happy arrangement" (Gelbart 146, 149). Partly responsible for their own displacement, women were put back in their place as "muses" not creators, as the almanac title confirmed.²³ Forty years later, the editors of the *Almanach des Prosateurs* sought to capitalize on women's literary assets:

Nous ne doutons pas que les porte-feuilles de nos plus aimables Écrivains, et sur-tout ceux des Dames, ne soient remplis d'une foule de pièces charmantes: Contes, Anecdotes, Epigrammes, Lettres tendres ou ingénieuses, Maximes, Réflexions piquantes, etc. qui perdroient beaucoup à être rimées, et qui ne demandent, pour être accueillies et fêtées, qu'à voir le jour. (AP I: v-vi, emphasis added)

Holding the key to the success and production of almanacs, women were thus doubly courted: they were coveted as readers by both almanacs, but the *Almanach des Prosateurs* also solicited them as creative writers.²⁴ Its strategy was no doubt to increase sales and loyalty—"fidélisation"—but the invite acknowledged the existence and neglect of women's writing. The dual status of women can be pictured through two emblematic characters: Chateaubriand's Atala and Germaine de Staël's Corinne, two of the most popular feminine figures at the beginning of the nineteenth century, engraved in countless almanacs (Grand-Carteret lxii): Atala is the muse that the *Almanach des Muses* seeks to conquer, Corinne is the conquering muse of the *Almanach des Prosateurs*.²⁵

Inflation of Verse: Devaluation of Poetry?

Both almanacs had in common a potpourri of "fugitive" compositions. Coexisting along serious genres, this lighter style enjoyed tremendous popularity.²⁶ Fugitive poems can

now be found in the poetic synthesis of modern anthologies as a legitimate category whose importance in the development of lyricism has clearly been established (Menant 217-72). The status of the variegated prose writing published by the *Almanach des Prosateurs* is far more complex, as the frontispiece and table of contents disclose. An engraving of Polymnie, the muse of eloquence, introduces the collection. At her feet an open volume lists names and titles. On the left page, four foreign authors: *Goldsmith* [Oliver], *Franklin* [Benjamin], *Wieland* [Christoph Martin], and *Meissner* [August Gottlieb].²⁷ On the right page, four French titles: *Candide* [1759], *Le Huron* [1767], *Le [emple] de Gnide* [1725], *La Reine de Golconde* [1761].²⁸ By the end of the eighteenth century, Voltaire's philosophical tales, Montesquieu's allegorical/pastoral prose poem, and Boufflers's libertine tale still represented innovative best-sellers that vindicated the power of prose in short fiction. For their part, Goldsmith, Wieland, and Meissner enjoyed an enduring vogue in France, expanding the national literary horizon beyond neo-classicism. Franklin stood for insurgency and originality. The assortment of these French and foreign sources of inspiration might seem arbitrary were it not for their convergence in excluding from the almanac's corpus verse, serious conventional genres, and non-fiction. In truth, few "jolies pièces en prose" match the brilliance of Voltaire's philosophical tales, which were in fact much longer than the *Almanach des Prosateurs*'s fugitive prose texts. The criteria of length and the parti-pris of marginalia meant that certain genres prevailed: tales,²⁹ dialogues, apologues, allegories,³⁰ visions, dreams, prosopopeia, short essays,³¹ letters,³² linguistic and semantic "fantaisies,"³³ and scores of miscellaneous texts without generic affiliation.³⁴ However, nothing resembling the

Encyclopédie's key definition, with its original emphasis on production, transmission and publication: "Fugitives (pièces-): Littérat. on appelle pièces fugitives, tous ces petits ouvrages sérieux ou légers qui s'échappent de la plume et du portefeuille d'un auteur, en différentes circonstances de sa vie, dont le public jouit d'abord en manuscrit, qui se perdent quelquefois, ou qui recueillis tantôt par l'avarice, tantôt par le bon goût, font ou l'honneur ou la honte de celui qui les a composés. Rien ne peint si bien la vie et le caractère d'un auteur que ses pièces fugitives: c'est là que se montre l'homme triste ou gai, pesant ou léger, tendre ou sévère, sage ou libertin, méchant ou bon, heureux ou malheureux. On y voit quelquefois toutes ces nuances se succéder; tant les circonstances qui nous inspirent sont diverses" (Masson 21).

²⁷ Benjamin Franklin had printed his *Bagatelles* with the personal printing press he had set up while residing in Passy. Two "bagatelles" appeared in the very first volume of the *Almanach des prosateurs*: A "Pétition adressée à tous ceux qui ont des enfants à élever; morceau inédit en français de Benjamin Franklin. Signé La Main Gauche" (date unknown) and the "Dialogue entre la goutte et Monsieur Franklin" (written in French in 1780). Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) appeared in translation in 1767, with new translations coming out in 1797, 1802, and 1803. Wieland's *Oberon* (1780) had been translated in 1784 and again in 1798, 1799 and 1800.

²⁸ Voltaire's titles are now known as "Candide ou l'optimisme" and "L'Ingénu." Montesquieu's *Temple de Gnide* belonged to the contested category of "poème en prose," which appeared in the wake of Fénelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque*. Finally, *Aline, Reine de Golconde*. Conte was the Chevalier de Boufflers's first publication and launched his poetic career.

²⁹ Cf. Jacques Cazotte's *Le Miroir* (AP IV: 177-84) and *Le Plaisir. Conte Moral* (AP IV: 211-7). Tales of all stripes abound: English, Greek, oriental, Indian, Arabic, Canadian.

³⁰ Cf. Parry's *Les Ailes de l'Amour* (AP V: 233-3).

³¹ Cf. Michaud's "De l'universalité de la langue française" (AP IV: 221-5) and Ségur's "Voltaire et Molière considérés sous le rapport du comique, dans l'art dramatique" (AP V: 126-134).

³² Beaumarchais's "A l'éditeur de la Chronique du Matin" is a light, humorous letter in the form of an "avis de recherche" whereby the narrator finds a lady's coat and deduct everything about its owner without having ever seen her. (AP V: 44-9)

³³ The philological bent of the editor Noël probably explains these serious or humorous musings on language: "Synonymes. Anesse, Bourique" (AP I: 7-9), "Lettre de l'Y" (AP I: 70-3), "Remarque grammatico-morale sur la particule ON" (AP I: 107-18), "Réclamation des lettres de l'alphabet, adressée aux chiffres arabes. Signé A.B.C. pour les vingt-quatre lettres de l'alphabet." (AP III: 118-23), "Synonymes; impétuosité, violence, emportement" (AP VIII: 126-30). As Roudaut noted, linguistic and grammatical exercises were also a path towards recapturing poetry's essence (29-35).

³⁴ Cf. Linguet's "Eloge de l'art du coiffeur des femmes" (AP I: 170-6); "Généalogie de la bonne plaisanterie" (AP VIII: 53-7); "Les aveux d'une femme de cinquante ans" (AP VIII: 141-8); "Nécrologie; le Chien savant" (AP VIII: 177-85), etc.

²³ For an historical study of women's struggle to find a voice in periodical publications and a forum to showcase their writing, see Gelbart's precise account of the *Journal des dames*'s rise and fall.

²⁴ The success of this strategy is difficult to evaluate as most contributions remain anonymous or published under pen names, for instance, "Aglæ Thimante, Peintresse en portraits, abonnée au Journal des Modes et des Dames" (AP II 20-4) or "Zéphirine" (AP VII 85-95). An *Almanach des dames* featuring prose and verse mostly on women by women saw light in 1802 and continued publication for thirty-eight years. See Grand-Carteret 359-60.

²⁵ In the vein of the *Journal des Dames*, the *Almanach des Prosateurs* included essays favorable to women, such as "Essai sur l'art d'avoir raison," a translation of Maria Edgeworth's *Essay on the sciences of self-justification* (AP 2: 182-9), and "Eloge des femmes, traduit de l'anglais" (AP 5: 262-4).

²⁶ An excellent analysis and examples can be found in Nicole Masson's recent *La Poésie fugitive au XVIIIe siècle*. Masson begins with a genealogy of the term "pièces fugitives" and highlights the following

nineteen hybrid compositions mentioned in the first part of this essay made its way into the *Almanach des Prosateurs*. One would wrongly conclude that poetry was absent from the collection. As an object of discourse, it dominates metatextual fragments; as a competing aesthetic, it permeates the few most avant-garde compositions, notably those of Louis Sébastien Mercier, prosateur extraordinaire, and his century's most outspoken prose advocate.

Let us examine how the two enterprises took position on the economics of poetry. In the *Almanach des Muses*'s first "Avertissement" (1766), the editors made the following pledge:

Au lieu de déclamer contre la fureur des Almanachs, nous nous sommes efforcés d'en faire un bon, & nous espérons qu'il pourra servir de contre-poison à ces Recueils de vers sans talent, à ces volumes de chansons insipides, qui ne semblent faits que pour accélérer la décadence du goût.³⁵

The project is conceived as an antidote to the crisis of verse that gripped the first half of the century. Although the causes of the crisis are not analyzed, editors suggest that the multiplication of almanacs fueled an inflationary process whereby verse, the most noble form of literary composition, became more than a poetic attribute: an indispensable social skill, displayed in correspondence, salon gatherings, public tributes, and crowned by publication.³⁶ The sheer difficulty of verse had always been highly valued, as many contemporary treatises made clear, however the large volume of published verses, their circumstantial nature, and the astonishing ease with which they were produced, eventually caused the argument of the "difficulté vaincue" to implode. Notwithstanding, the social prestige of verse survived, as editors of the *Almanach des Muses* well understood. In addition to stimulating competition by selecting the best of the yearly poetic production, editors acted as judges whose mission was to remedy the decadence of taste with critical notes on each chosen poem:

...il n'en est aucun [journal] dans lequel on fasse des remarques critiques sur les Pièces fugitives. On s'est efforcé de remplir cet objet dans l'*Almanach des Muses*, & l'on a cru que des observations honnêtes et sévères pourroient être de quelque utilité pour l'instruction des étrangers & des jeunes-gens, la pureté de la langue & la conservation du vrai goût. (AM 1766 : vi)

One only needs to peruse these critical notes to gain a sense of the impasse French poetry had reached. An example from the first pages of 1766 collection will suffice to illustrate the "chute d'Icare" so well analyzed by Sylvain Menant.³⁷ The poem, a down-to-earth epistle written by Lemierre on the occasion of a friend's change of career from the military to "fermier général," centers on the concern that a more elevated status might lead to a decline in friendship.³⁸ The eleven editorial notes are meant to be constructive and critical: on the positive side, harmony, expressiveness, striking images, felicitous choice of words, a revived archaism ("simplesse"), and an apt neologism ("insouciance"); on the negative side: overly simple rhyme schemes, linguistic errors, plodding multisyllabic words, and hiatus. Follows a rather vacuous conclusion: "Cette Epître annonce une ame libre, une belle ame. L'Auteur [...] a dans les pièces fugitives un ton original qui les rend extrêmement piquantes." The frequent epithet "piquant" and its variations ("fin,"

³⁵ "Avertissement des Editeurs," *Almanach des Muses*, 1766. iii. Henceforth referred to as AM followed by year and page number.

³⁶ On the phenomenon of "poésie de société," see Menant, 235-55. The film *Ridicule* (Patrice Leconte, 1997) captures how speaking in verse became a jeu de salon, an exercise in wit and intellectual seduction within cultivated circles.

³⁷ See also Margaret Gilman's first chapter, "The Nadir of Poetry," 1-47.

³⁸ M. [Antoine-Marin] Le Mierre, "Epître à M****" (AM 1766: 19-24).

"ingénieux," "charmant," "élégant") invariably describe a poem's qualities, with compliments such as "de l'esprit, de l'élégance & du sentiment rendu avec beaucoup de finesse." Typical examples of criticism include "point poétique," "vers trop prosaïque," "un peu dur," "un peu lâche," "inutile," "expression précieuse," "pensée recherchée," "pensée que l'on a outrée pour faire une antithèse," "épithète hasardée," "pas de bon goût," "vieille poésie," etc. Simply put: divorce between form and content, expression and inspiration, *techné* and *poesis*.

Paradoxically, these editorial critical judgments could be applied to the whole collection. Cf. the following one-liners in 1800: "De l'élégance, de l'esprit, du talent, mais peu de poésie" (AM 1800: 268) or "Composition sage, style correct, détails heureux, mais quelque fois trop peu de poésie." Where did poetry flee? A two-line dedication to a "versificateur diffus" suggests that winged poetry did not take flight but rather turned pedestrian: "Vos vers sont bien tournés, les rimes en sont belles/Certes les pieds y sont, mais je cherche les ailes" (AM 1807: 182). Submissions to the *Almanach des Muses* confirm that by the end of the eighteenth century "versificateurs" and "poèteraux" had vastly outnumbered authentic poets. The majority of fugitive poems in the *Almanach des Muses* prove that it was no longer difficult, let alone rare, to write in verse, hence its devaluation. But the devaluation of verse concerned only its poetic oversupply, not its authentic value. Such is the conclusion one can draw from the *Almanach des Muses*: its existence rested on its paradoxical role as a critic of the proliferation of "versificateurs" and trivial verses, and simultaneously as their disseminator. In other words, the desire to reform poetic taste mingled with the propagation of its decadence, its stylistic and generic decay, fugitive poems representing a market too attractive to renounce. The successive prefaces of the *Almanach des Muses* clearly reflect the editors' dissatisfaction with poetic genres: in 1768, their "avertissement" expressed concern at the deluge of light poetry, deploring the rarity of "élans et grande manière du génie;" in 1810, editors complained of the opposite—the disappearance of light poetry, in which French writers used to excel, and the predominance of didactic, moral, and descriptive poems. Although translations of foreign works were introduced for the sake of variety and novelty, inspiration and invention were replaced by mere compilation—the gist of Sébastien Mercier's criticism against the *Almanach des Muses*:

C'est une corbeille de fleurs poétiques, que *Frère-Quêteur* au Parnasse offre tous les ans au public. On appelle ainsi le rédacteur, parce que pendant toute l'année il sollicite les faveurs des enfants d'Apollon, qui contribuent de leurs travaux à former son recueil et son patrimoine. Il vit de sa quête.

Frère-Quêteur prend et entasse au hasard toutes ces fleurs, sans assortir les couleurs; il en compose un énorme bouquet, à peu près comme le fait un paysan maladroit à la fête de son bailli, puis il le jette au nez du public la veille du jour de l'an. Les fleurs vives, les fleurs pâles, les fleurs inodores, les fleurs odoriférantes, les orties même y sont mêlées indistinctement. [...]

On s'occupe de ce recueil les quinze premiers jours du mois de janvier; puis, semblable à certains insectes éphémères, il pâlit et disparaît. (Mercier 1994 1 : 1354)

Could Mercier's critical metaphor apply to the *Almanach des Prosateurs* as well? Were its prosaic flowers better chosen and arranged? Did their selection favor quality over quantity? Mercier captured the irony behind annual collections in prose or verse—the confusing of wheat and chaff, the lack of critical distance. Each almanac's selection proves that neither was yet able to exceed convention nor radically innovate. This said, the *Almanach des Prosateurs* includes a number of deceptively conventional yet

penetrating texts: their subject-matters target poetry, exposing the shortcomings of neo-classical verse, thereby challenging the practice and taste of poets and readers alike.

How far poetry had strayed is revealed in a text published in the 1808 volume of the *Almanach des Prosateurs* under the title "Athénée de Picpus. Lettre adressée à l'un des rédacteurs du *Journal de l'Empire*" (AP VII: 166-76). The letter, signed "Blaise Cornet, épicière," recalls the shopkeeper's misadventures in founding an Athénée wherein poetry contests were to be held in the fashion of Athena's temple. The ironic tone belies its authenticity (English pirates steal his cheese, which precipitates his bankruptcy). The closing statement, that his letter be published "pour l'instruction de tous les épicières qui pourraient se mettre dans la tête de fonder des thénées [sic]," contains the anecdote's moral: shopkeepers should not try to be poets, "A chacun son métier." The episode is ambiguous and can be read as evidence of both the success and failure of the democratization of poetry. From the point of view of the editors of the *Almanach des Prosateurs*, it is an ironic caricature of amateurism, and as such, a vindication of prose. The editors' choice to publish other (fictitious or authentic) letters sent to periodicals allowed them to insert a slice of the prosaic world and let various social classes mingle. For its part, the *Almanach des Muses* had briefly introduced a measure of equality when revolutionary times called for the word "citoyen" to precede all names in the table of contents (all but the King's and Voltaire's!).

Another anonymous fugitive text, published in the 1803 *Almanach des Prosateurs*, tackles the status of poetry. Entitled "Description géographique du royaume de Poésie. Traduit de l'anglais" (AP III: 5-12), it appears to be a rewriting of Fontenelle's *Description de l'empire de la poésie* published in the *Mercure Galant* in 1678—an allegory pinning down poetical genres on a geographical map.³⁹ Reclaimed by the editors more than a century later, this witty, elaborate allegory retains its stylistic force, and proves to be an even bleaker survey of the eighteenth-century literary landscape than it was of late seventeenth-century poetry. Although the "Haute Poésie" and its capital city, Epic Poetry, remain at a high altitude, it is a province as inhospitable as the "Basse Poésie." Ruins of ancient cities are found in the mountains of Tragedy, and the enchanted palace of Opera has been overtaken by Burlesque troops and renamed Opéra-Comique. The visit continues through the dangerous province of Phony Wit and its capital Elegy, the forest of Stupidity, the wasteland of Imitation, and the cold suburbs of word games (Anagramme, Acrostiche, Charade). Crossing the Empire of Poetry are the rivers Rhyme and Reason, but only the latter flows through the "vastes solitudes du Bon Sens." The allegory ends on the fugitive "pieces" floating off the shoals of Good Sense:

On voit sans cesse flotter sur les eaux quantité de petits morceaux détachés de divers endroits, et qui étant la légèreté même, sont emportés ça et là, et menacent quelquefois les côtes du *Bon-Sens*. Il s'agissait d'empêcher tous ces *Sonnets, Madrigaux, Chansons, Bouquets*, etc. d'aborder sur les côtes. Mais après de nouvelles réflexions, on a jugé qu'il n'y aurait pas grand danger qu'ils y arrivassent jamais. (AP III: 11-12)

Ultimately the geographical allegory records the eighteenth century's prevailing failure to heed Boileau's prescriptions in his 1674 *Art poétique*,⁴⁰ but it does so without questioning

³⁹ Fontenelle's allegory was itself a development of Antoine Furetière's 1659 *Nouvelle allégorique ou histoire des derniers troubles arrivés au royaume de l'éloquence*. Unlike Furetière's preeminence of the Queen rhetoric over the Princess poetry, Fontenelle's allegory affirmed the superiority of poetry, yet like his predecessor he denounced the incompatibility of rhyme with reason and common sense.

⁴⁰ Like Furetière, Boileau had warned against the difficult cohabitation between rhyme and "bon sens": "Quelque sujet qu'on traite, ou plaisant, ou sublime, Que toujours le bon sens s'accorde avec la rime: L'un et l'autre vainement ils semblent se hair;

the rigid forms and rules it codified, themselves part of the crisis of verse. In the end, the allegory's spatialisation of genres in lieu of a vertical hierarchy underscores but a multiplicity of borders and limits.

The Value of Prose

The editors of the short-lived *Almanach des Prosateurs* were "frères-quêteurs" like their competitors, collecting a hodgepodge of "bagatelles" in prose, to borrow Franklin's term, guided by variety, not generic affiliation.⁴¹ They prided themselves on the diversity brought by a loose alternation between French and translated foreign fiction and non-fiction.⁴² The most remarkable contention, however, can be read at the end of the fourth-year preface:

Un heureux accord vient de rapprocher l'*Almanach des Prosateurs* de l'*Almanach des Muses*. Sœur cadette de la Poésie, l'humble Prose n'annonce ni rivalité, ni préférence; elle a bien plutôt le désir et l'espoir d'éprouver les bénignes influences de son aînée, et de marcher sous sa bannière: trop heureuse si elle ne paroît pas tout à fait partagée en cadette, et si des lecteurs indulgens ont la bonté de lui trouver un air de famille! (AP V: vii)

The felicitous agreement in question refers to a change in printer/distributor announced on the front page, whereby both almanacs could be purchased henceforth from the same bookstore, at "M.F. Louis, Libraire, rue de Savoie, no 12." This commercial arrangement was no doubt motivated by cost-cutting and profit-making concerns, and served a marketing strategy to increase readership. More intriguing is how this economic partnership is couched in literary terms. Taking up a common metaphor, the editor personifies the sisterhood of poetry and prose as an unequal relationship between first and second born, hence the obligatory humility of younger prose. What does prose's inferiority complex refer to exactly in the post-revolutionary world of 1805, inheritor of a century of acclaimed novels and rousing plays, which, one would think, had long lifted prose above its second-class status? Obviously, prose's inferiority cannot apply to its undisputed conquest of the novel or the stage; it refers to the *prosateurs*' attempts to penetrate the poetic sphere via traditional poetic genres, especially, but not exclusively, the shorter genres featured in the *Almanach des Muses*: fables, tales, "pièces fugitives," etc. In other words, to adopt poetry's closure in contrast to prose's expansive propensities. "Desire and hope to feel the benign influence of its elder sister, and to march under its banner," the wish that readers detect their "family resemblance," and emphasis on emulation, not rivalry, are tale-telling phrases that refer to the poeticisation of prose.

Did the collection of the *Almanach des Prosateurs* succeed in this project? Out of the 359 entries consulted,⁴³ only a fraction of them yields the kind of crafted, condensed, poeticized fragments that could compete alongside the nineteen hybrid prose texts that gained entry into our two modern anthologies as representative of efforts to reconcile

La rime est une esclave, et ne doit qu'obéir." (v. 27-30).

⁴¹ "Destiné à devenir le dépôt des productions légères de l'année, qui disparaissent avec les feuilles éphémères dont elle font l'ornement et le succès, ce répertoire peut encore avoir le mérite de sauver de l'oubli ces pièces fugitives qui, dans des temps antérieurs ont échappé, tantôt à la plume d'un sexe dont la grâce et la finesse caractérisent les écrits, tantôt à la paresse d'un homme du monde, tantôt au caprice d'un écrivain distingué; ces saillies ingénieuses, ces jeux de l'imagination, ces badinages piquants où l'on aime à reconnaître l'esprit français" (AP V: vi-vii).

⁴² "On s'est attaché aussi à faire passer dans notre langue des morceaux anglais, allemands, italiens, qui ont le double avantage d'entretenir avec nos voisins des relations littéraires, et de jeter dans l'Ouvrage une agréable diversité." Ibid.

⁴³ I could not consult Volume 6 (1807), missing from the Bibliothèque Nationale collection.

prose and poetry. The explanation is not that the first decade of the nineteenth century still considered prose the exclusive domain eloquence, eschewing any poetic potential: the example set by Fénelon's *Les aventures de Télémaque*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writing, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* or Chateaubriand's *Atala*, had refuted this reduction. However, short poetic forms, whether noble or light, turn out to be much more dependent on versification. This renders far more significant the few innovative examples that found their way into the *Almanach des Prosateurs*.

Foremost in metaphoric invention is Denis Diderot's beautiful short text from 1769, *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre, ou avis à ceux qui ont plus de goût que de fortune*,⁴⁴ inserted in the 1804 volume of the *Almanach des Prosateurs* (AP III: 20-9). Is it a detached fragment (Mortier)? a modern essay (Werner)? generic classifications dissolve when confronted with the complexity of this original prose. Its presence in the *Almanach* invites a "mise en abyme" reading. The triptych-like text, built with sets of contrasts, illustrates three worlds: the world of liberating prose, the world of corrupting artifice—in direct opposition to each other—and the world of art, which resolves the dichotomy. The philosopher first bemoans the replacement of his worn-out robe by a brand new scarlet robe, then the subsequent metamorphosis of his humble lodging with precious furniture (all courtesy of a well-intentioned friend), an unwelcome transformation which has caused discomfort and aggravation to his mind and body. The scarlet robe, as if bleeding on his furniture and décor, destroyed the harmony, beauty, and unity of his living space. Whereas the old robe matched plain, practical furnishings, reflecting the philosopher's ethics and aesthetics of simplicity, the scarlet robe imposed refined, stylish, domestic objects, introducing luxury and vanity where *mediocritas* and pride use to rein. Gone are the prosaic belongings and raw material—straw chair, wooden table, Bergame tapestry, pine shelf, clay sculpture. In their place: craftsmanship and noble textures—leather armchair, precious desk, Damas tapestry, inlaid armoire, antique bronze sculpture, and, adding insult to injury, two symbols of *vanitas*: a mirror and a clock. Only one item remains from the philosopher's past: a modest carpet, cherished as a down-to-earth reminder of his first station in life, an ironic carpet of origins so to speak. Symbols of the prosaic world (the carpet, the worn-out robe and furniture) are linked with symbolic prosaic figures dear to the philosopher (Diogenes, a peasant woman) and pitched against symbols of an artificial world (the scarlet robe, the elegant furniture and décor) with its own iconic representations (Aristippe, *vanitas*). The freedom and honesty of the poor philosopher, master of his domain, turned into the starched preciousness of the idle rich, slave to his possessions. "Denis le philosophe" affirms his resistance to the corrupting, poisonous effect of wealth and artifice, yet knows too well that a return to the prose of his former world is impossible. And so, switching to a lyrical mode, the philosopher eventually exalts the perfection of the only new possession he would now refuse to part with: a seascape by the contemporary painter Vernet. In the last part of his triptych, Diderot transcends all previous antitheses in ekphrasis, a minute description of Vernet's "Fin de tempête." It begins as an apostrophe to God, whose agency the spectator sees omnipresent in the scene unfolding on the canvas. A succession of imperatives and exclamations breathes life into each figure and natural element, imagination animating the silent drama. With the power of his representation, "[l]e peintre a humilié le philosophe." The philosopher, however, recasts his ekphrasis, this time articulating the painter's aesthetic: truthfulness (three times), vigor, ease, purity, harmony, the "pittoresque" next to the unfathomable, and all-important light.

Diderot's *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre* is a prescient "mise en page"/"mise en scène" of the poetry of everyday objects, their metaphorical value and metonymic relationships, which will be at the center of prose poems such as Baudelaire's

⁴⁴ First published in Germany in 1772. See Diderot's *Oeuvres* IV. 822-4.

and Francis Ponge's. Diderot's trademark vivacious and versatile prose welcomes here an abundance of poetic literary figures, exploding frameworks. His modern reinterpretation of the classical *ut pictura poesis* and his ironic approach to mimesis presage the slow dismantling of once sacrosanct poetic principles.

Diderot's text is unique but not alone in the *Almanach des Prosateurs*. A fragment by Mercier, "Des relieurs et de la reliure" (AP I: 267-70)⁴⁵ develops a similar, though less lyrical, discourse upon objects. Written in the first person, it is a confession of idiosyncratic likes and dislikes, this time for brochures and unbound manuscripts, easy to reach and read, vs. ornate, bound volumes, hard to keep open, too precious to handle, and only purchased for show. As with Diderot, Mercier's preference goes for informality over deference, content over appearances, usage over ostentation, freedom of spirit over subjugation to matter.⁴⁶ The text is similarly constructed around sets of oppositions and given tempo by recurring apostrophes. Mercier's journalistic skills alone do not account for the attention paid to form. Like Diderot, he deliberately exploits prose's semantic range, privileging irony, to construct within a prose fragment an aesthetic of the prosaic.

Another example of Mercier's mastery of prose is an apologue titled "Les limes," which shares traits with modern prose poems (AP III: 94-6).⁴⁷ Once, in a Paris hardware store on a Seine quay, metal files ("limes") started a civil war in the middle of the night, in which twelve different kinds of files battled one another: "lime tire-point, lime à feuille de sauge, lime plate batarde, lime à potence, queue de rat, demi-douce", etc. Aghast, the shopkeeper reminds the files of their now crushed glorious destiny, laments the loss of their teeth, strength, and power, and in a fit of rage throws them all out in the gutter, where rust further ruins them. The belief in the poetry of unfamiliar, specialized vocabulary anticipates Aloysius Bertrand's semantic rarities in *Gaspard de la Nuit*. The ironic intrusion of the narrator at the beginning, claiming in parenthesis to be a reliable historian, and his cryptic moral lesson at the end of the apologue — "Ecrivains de nos jours, relisez cet Apologue" — reminds one of Baudelaire's satirical, anecdotal, prose poems in *Spleen de Paris*. Realism is offset by metaphorism — as in "Le chien et le flacon" — a staging of the "high and low" problematic at the heart of the confrontation between prose and poetry.

The editors of the *Almanach des Prosateurs* sensed that prose was better suited than verse to convey the discontinuity of dreams, while at the same time it gained a poetic character thanks to irrational dream associations. Dreams are also fugitive in essence, unless the dreamer pencils them down, and keeps them in his or her "porte-feuille." They corresponded perfectly to the type of texts sought after by editors. For instance, an anonymous submission, "Les Rêves," relates a series of wish-fulfillment dreams, building creative symmetries revolving around truth and imagination, reality and

⁴⁵ First published in the *Journal de Paris*, 20 nivôse An VII-9 janvier 1799. The text is reproduced in Jean-Claude Bonnet's recent edition of Mercier's *Mon Bonnet de Nuit. Suivi de Du Théâtre* under "Textes critiques" (1537-9).

⁴⁶ "Les livres sont des amis qu'il faut pouvoir traiter familièrement. J'aime la lecture, et la Reliure est sa plus cruelle ennemie. [...] c'est du carton doré et surdoré; ce sont des peaux de bêtes bien polies, dont on couvre les productions du génie, et que l'on vend à l'ostentation et à l'ignorance. [...] Les feuilles peu à peu se collent de manière qu'on ose plus les séparer; le volume doré et brillant figure en masse, et n'est plus qu'un meuble meublant. [...]"

A moi, faciles et complaisantes brochures! vous ne m'empêchez pas, comme les belles éditions, de lire longtemps; vous ne me fatiguez ni l'œil ni la main; vous n'êtes point rebelles à mes caresses; je tourne et retourne le livre dans tous les sens; il m'appartient, je le corne et le charge de notes; je fais connaissance avec lui d'un bout à l'autre; ô brochures! vous ne surchargez pas ma table; et si vous tombez, je ne crains ni pour vous, ni pour moi.

Mais ce livre superbement relié, je n'en puis rien faire, il m'échappe des doigts, il a un air matériel. [...]" Mercier, "Des relieurs et de la reliure" (AP I: 267-9).

⁴⁷ First published in the *Journal de Paris*, 3 nivôse An VIII-24 décembre 1799.

invention, fiction and non-fiction.⁴⁸ The series is left open-ended, again an experimental feature hardly possible in versified poetry.

Two examples of Mercier's philosophical dreams appeared in the *Almanach des Prosateurs*. In "Vision," the narrator, locked up in Westminster, meditates on the futility of tombs for universal geniuses, then conjures up the shadow of Newton (AP II: 115-7). The tone changes into ironic pomposity — "Salut, grand illusionneur! hiérophante de la ténébreuse géométrie et du pays désert des abstractions." In the subsequent dialogue, the narrator chastises a penitent Newton for his impossible system and predicts its collapse. In "L'égoïsme," originally subtitled "Songe," a white specter leads the dreamer to witness the harrowing fate of selfish beings (AP IV: 62-8).⁴⁹ Both dreams seem far from poetic today because didacticism overwhelms their oneiric value. As such, they are reminders that balancing a moral, philosophical message with poetic expression was one of the major difficulties experienced by all eighteenth-century prosateurs who penned "poèmes en prose."

The *Almanach des Prosateurs* collected many prose fragments as forgettable as most of the *Almanach des Muses*'s fugitive poems. However, the presence in their midst of some particularly unusual prose texts, some dating back to a quarter of century earlier, offers an insight into the desire and difficulty of drawing out prose's poetic force within short forms. Whenever new forms and genres emerge in the literary landscape, metatexts pro or against innovation proliferate: here, the self-reflexivity shared by the above prose texts is a response to changing poetics. To advocate the value of prose in transforming traditionally-versified short poems, the *Almanach des Prosateurs* sought metacritical fragments, as former and subsequent examples show. In a tone reminiscent of the most self-reflexive novel of the eighteenth century, Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste*, an anecdote entitled "Le talent de voir" focuses on the narrator Vertage, who playfully cultivates suspense to delay his story (AP I: 218-32). The minute, detailed narrative of the walk just taken, and the rêveries it provoked, is set in contrast with the utter inability of a second character (Froidure) to recall and relate any specifics, although both men went the same way. The anecdote accents the talent of observation, not imagination, as we had seen in previous texts. Observation leading to description, the story implies that if one knows how to look and listen, one will be able to justly describe, captivate listeners and readers— a modern, empiricist, re-anchoring of imagination in the senses and their descriptive powers, away from classical allegorical flights.

The Commerce of Prose and Poetry

The first volume of the *Almanach des Prosateurs* included a "Recette pour faire une Tragédie" (AP I: 271-2), and its penultimate volume a "Recette pour composer un poème épique."⁵⁰ Framing the collection, these cookbook recipes reduce the two highest poetic

genres to a prescription for mixing a series of clichés, in a stinging caricature of the consequences of lost originality. The formulaic production of tragic and epic poetry infers the uniform reproductions that Mercier criticized à propos the *Almanach des Muses*.⁵¹

Irony culminates in "Manufacture ou bureau d'esprit," signed "le Véridique" (AP 2: 275-7) and "Projet d'un bureau littéraire,"⁵² published anonymously in 1802 and 1805 respectively. Poetic genres are again defined spatially, not in terms of provinces but offices, where anonymous writers produce quickly, upon request, and for a fee, the perfect poem for the right occasion.

Les gens que leurs occupations empêchent de se livrer au goût de la littérature, ceux que la nature en éloigne, tout le monde, jusqu'aux sots inclusivement, pourra se procurer, à peu de frais, telle réputation d'esprit qu'il voudra. Depuis le madrigal jusqu'au poème épique, notre bureau sera fourni de tout.

Each project satirizes a social *cum* literary need all too real. As already mentioned, verse had long become a necessity for social integration, a proof of one's wit, hence the utopic project to make it accessible to the majority. The "bureau d'esprit" consists in a "manufacture" where skilled workers, such as the "forgerons poétiques," specialize in different genres. The "bureau littéraire" would feature hackneyed figures painted on each office walls for inspiration's sake—an equivalent of recipe lists—then proceed to the distribution of its poetic wares. The price of each poetic genre is given on a sliding scale according to its difficulty. I cite this catalogue in extenso to show how the precise hierarchy and codification of major and minor genres—again a reality of eighteenth-century literature—allows a break-down of each category with quantifiable degrees of complexity and proportionate merchant value:

Pour un poème épique, on paiera 100 liv. en le commandant, et 50 liv. en recevant chaque chant. La durée de l'ouvrage n'excèdera jamais un an.

Pour une tragédie, 50 liv. en souscrivant, 20 liv. pour le premier acte, 18 liv. pour le second, 30 liv. pour le troisième, 15 liv. pour le quatrième, et 60 liv. pour le cinquième, lorsqu'il n'y aura ni spectacle, ni coup de théâtre: quand il y en aura, il coûtera 96 liv.; de sorte que la meilleure tragédie s'excèdera jamais 179 liv. Elles seront livrées en six mois.

Cependant, ne nous écartant jamais de notre but, celui de contenter le public, nous ferons un rabais desdites 50 liv. pour les comédies bourgeoises, attendu que le débit en sera plus considérable, et le travail plus aisé.

Le prix des opéras ne peut se fixer au juste; mais de quelque genre qu'ils puissent être, ils seront livrés en quinze jours.

Les autres ouvrages en vers se livreront en trois jours, vingt-quatre heures, ou dans quatre heures, relativement à leur étendue, et l'on paiera;

SAVOIR:

l'Empire, le Journal de Paris, le Plébisciste; faites marcher leur prose sur douze pieds, et que chacune de leurs lignes finisse par une rime aussi exacte qu'il se pourra. [...] Quand vous n'aurez plus rien à dire, que ce ne soit pas une raison pour vous arrêter; ayez recours aux apostrophes et aux comparaisons; adressez-vous aux Dieux, au soleil, à la lune sur-tout. [...] M. Michaud, "Recette pour composer un poème épique" (AP VII: 146-8).

⁵¹ "Il y a des tics littéraires qu'il est si facile d'imiter, qu'ils deviennent épidémiques. C'est ce qu'on remarque en lisant cet almanach composé par tant de plumes différentes; c'est une couleur, un ton uniformes. Vous jurez que la moitié du livret est de la même main. On y aperçoit le même tour, la même manière, la même prétention à l'esprit; et jusqu'au choix des mots et des images, tout vous répète l'accent du persiflage à la mode." Mercier, "Almanach des muses" (1994 1: 1355).

⁵² Anon. The date 1799 appears in brackets at the end of the text. (AP 5: 136-143).

⁴⁸ "Un Poète à la mode a rêvé qu'il avait fait une comédie admirable; des sylphes l'abreuvaient d'encens; il disait: je vais faire oublier Molière. Il s'est éveillé aux sifflets du parterre.

Un auteur charmant a rêvé qu'il avait fait le plus joli des romans. Quand l'auteur s'est éveillé, le roman a paru; tout le monde a voulu le lire, et tout le monde s'est endormi.

Un mari de Paris s'était endormi sur le chevet de l'hymen; il rêvait à la tendresse et à la fidélité de son épouse: il a été réveillé par un huissier qui lui signifiait le divorce de sa chaste épouse; elle allait épouser son valet. [...]

Un jeune guerrier rêvait sur les bords du Nil que, seul, porté par sa fortune, il traverserait l'étendue des mers couvertes d'ennemis; qu'il arracherait un grand peuple au joug de la folie et de ses propres fureurs, et que du sein même de la guerre, il ferait sortir une branche d'olivier qui ombragerait l'Europe entière; il s'est éveillé aux acclamations de l'Univers, étonné de n'avoir pas rêvé." Anon., "Les Rêves" (AP II: 73-4).

⁴⁹ Originally published in 1784-6 in *Mon Bonnet de nuit* (Mercier 1999: 517-22).

⁵⁰ "Prenez une action qui ait un commencement, un milieu et une fin; qu'elle ait sur-tout une fin, car il est bon qu'un poème épique finisse. [...] Laissez vos personnages sur la terre et montez au ciel; restez-y pendant les trois ou quatre premiers chants. [...] Semez ça et là quelques tempêtes, quelques fleaux faciles à décrire; délayez le tout dans un bon nombre de vers alexandrins... procurez-vous la *Gazette de France*, le *Journal de*

Pour une héroïde.....	6 l[ivres]
Une ode.....	30 l.
Une satire.....	15 l.
Un discours moral et philosophique.....	4 l.
Une épître.....	2 l. 8 s[ous]
Une chanson.....	1 l. 4 s.
Une épigramme.....	1 l.
Des couplets, la pièce.....	8 s.
Dito, scandaleux.....	3 l.
Un épithalame.....	24 l.
Une énigme.....	8 s.
Un logogriphe.....	6 s.
Un bouquet.....	3 s.

Les ouvrages en prose seront livrés de suite, et coûteront:
SAVOIR:

Complimens d'académie de province.....	50 l[ivres]
Discours sur un évènement public.....	10 l.
Critiques de toutes espèces.....	5 l.
Projets.....	sans prix fixe
{ de félicitations.....	1 l.
{ de bonne année.....	8 s[ous]
Lettres { d'amour.....	1 l. 4 s.
{ d'emprunt.....	3 l.
{ de crédit.....	4 s.
Lettres { aux protecteurs.....	2 l.
{ aux grands.....	6 s.
Billets de toute espèce.....	5 s.

Les tarifs ci-dessus ont été rédigés par un homme éclairé; et l'on s'apercevra, au prix, que nous avons eu soin de proportionner aux besoins et aux genres; de sorte que ceux qui sont plus aisés à composer et à débiter, coûtent moins que d'autres. (AP V : 140-2)

The price list caricatures writing as a mere trade with rates contingent on labor costs, obeying the laws of supply and demand. Whereas the *Almanach des Muses* presented poetry as a gallant commerce between men and women, the *Almanach des Prosateurs* satirized it as a profitable business. The "projet d'un bureau littéraire" takes at face value the economics of prose and poetry. While the catalogue of poetic genres is quite exhaustive, fiction is noticeably absent from the lists of prose works available: novels and short fiction escaped price tagging, perhaps due to their yet-to-be instituted status as creativity's new refuge, but above all a confirmation that prose fictions still constituted, at the dawn of the nineteenth century, less legitimate, thus less favored, productions for aspiring amateurs and for society.

Epilogue

In 1802, Jean-François Collin d'Harleville, frequent contributor to the *Almanach des Muses* and recently admitted to the Institut's "Société philotechnique," read one of his compositions to a gathering of fellow members and connoisseur public of ladies and gentlemen. Contemporary news accounts favorably reviewed this "Dialogue de la Prose et de la Poésie," a witty conversation between verse-speaking Poetry and plain-speaking Prose, defining and defending their respective domains (Tissier 1: 271). Seven years

later, an anonymous "Dialogue entre la prose et la poésie" visibly inspired by d'Harleville's allegory, opens what will turn out to be the last volume of the *Almanach des Prosateurs* (AP VIII: 1-13), only it departs significantly from its source. Instead of an urbane dispute where rights and merits are mutually balanced, the *Almanach's* dialogue personifies poetry as weakened by the burden of versification, sick with overuse and misuse, ridiculous and exhausted in its sporadic verse. Prose, in turns condescending and mocking, lectures its sickened sister, reproaching her of talking too much and about too many things. Poetry's greeting ("ô ma soeur, salut, trois fois salut") offers ammunition to prose's verdict: excessive propriety, affectation, "emphasis," extravagance, lack of common sense, and excess of commonplaces—the criticism is without appeal. Poetry's elevated style is reduced to "drôleries," "enfantillages," and "sottises harmonieuses." Prose claims here the prerogative of a first-born.⁵³ Prose's mea-culpa ("je sais fort bien être poétique [...] mais ce n'est pas ce que je fais de mieux") summarizes a century of painstaking efforts. Interestingly, prose's ambition is confined to non-fiction (history, mythology, astronomy, mathematics), another instance of the exclusion of fictional narratives, novels in particular, from the corpus of prose achievements. Poetry consents to amicable cohabitation, acknowledging her languor in a melodramatic tone: "J'ai des vapeurs, je suis mal à l'aise, je crains de prendre une maladie sérieuse: je me sens une difficulté de vivre, comme disait mon ami Fontenelle." The diagnosis is overwork: Poetry has worn itself out by not restraining its domain and losing itself in fields and verses too unpoetical.⁵⁴ Prose promptly suggests that Poetry take a break "pour un siècle ou deux."

As fate would have it, the *Almanach des Muses* prospered for several more decades whereas the *Almanach des Prosateurs* abruptly died, ceasing publication soon after its eighth volume had so confidently announced the triumph of Prose. Could this be the armistice to the "guerre d'extermination" waged by prose and poetry?⁵⁵ Rather than a war, however, the history of the relationship between the two modes is best understood as

⁵³ "La Prose : Savez-vous bien que je suis votre aînée, et que, sans me flatter, je crois avoir été mieux élevée que vous. Vous n'avez été toute votre vie qu'un enfant gâté, à qui on a fait croire qu'il avait beaucoup de génie, et vous êtes partie de là pour extravaguer sans cesse, et pour vous croire autorisée à n'avoir pas l'ombre du sens commun, avec vos rimes, vos césures, vos hémistiches, etc. Pour moi, j'aurais honte de me servir de toutes ces drôleries, de tous ces enfantillages, qui coupent un discours en nombres égaux de syllabes, et qui m'arrête la respiration à chaque ligne. Je dis bonnement ce que je veux dire, dans l'ordre le plus simple, le plus naturel; je ne me crois pas obligée d'employer la moitié de mon discours en lieux communs de remplissage, pour rendre l'autre moitié plus piquante ou plus sonore. Cependant je ne suis pas étrangère à l'harmonie du langage; j'élève le mien, quand il le faut, à la hauteur des grandes idées. Je sais fort bien être poétique, quand il m'en prend la fantaisie, mais ce n'est pas ce que je fais de mieux, et j'ai bien quelque honte d'avoir parfois fait la belle parleur et la précieuse ridicule à propos d'histoire, de mythologie, d'astronomie ou de mathématique. Du reste je vous pardonne volontiers toutes vos sottises harmonieuses; pardonnez-moi ma trivialité et mes mots propres. Je ne demande pas mieux que de bien vivre avec vous: veuillez descendre jusqu'à moi, toute vile que je suis, et causons de bonne amitié" (AP 8 : 3-4).

⁵⁴ "Vous faites une quantité de vers effroyables qui vous minent le tempérament et la santé. Vous en faites à tout propos, sur toutes sortes de sujets, sans consulter vos forces et vos moyens. Vous parlez de mille choses qui ne sont point de votre ressort et qui ne vous regardent point. Je ne désespère pas de vous voir un jour mettre en vers les ouvrages d'*Archimède*, d'*Euclide*, de *Newton*, et vous finirez sans doute par faire un poème sur une ligne" (AP 8 : 5-6). Prose demotes here descriptive, "scientific" poetry. In "L'Invention," André Chénier had wished that Calliope "[m]ontant sa lyre d'or sur un plus noble ton/En langage des dieux fasse parler Newton" (Seth 383). Citing Chénier's verse, Delon explains this controversial enterprise: "La poésie doit trouver non seulement des sujets mais un souffle neuf dans le développement de la science et de la philosophie." Preface, 14.

⁵⁵ Menant ponders the "question embarrassante du clivage entre prose et poésie" in his conclusion: "au-delà de la guerre d'extermination que ces deux modes se sont livrée un moment, le choix demeure posé pour les écrivains, et se résout selon des critères qui ne sont pas encore éclaircis aujourd'hui. Pourquoi Voltaire traitait-il des idées de Newton tantôt en prose, tantôt en vers? Des explications ponctuelles peuvent être proposées, mais ne prennent leur sens que dans une étude d'ensemble des relations entre prose et poésie à l'âge classique, qui reste à faire" (Menant 352). The goal of the present essay is to provide an entry point into this vast question.

a competition having run its course by the end of the century. By engaging in a fierce contest, prose and poetry both improved under the pressure to move beyond allegory. Avant-garde *prosateurs* subsumed the best part of poetry, exploring its metaphorical core without having to versify it, while a new generation of poets embraced the "I" prose had unveiled. Far from a stale or obsolete literary enterprise, prose and verse almanacs jointly stimulated reform while playfully tending to bagatelles, an economics and an art of the fugitive that advanced the venture of poetic emancipation.

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