Theory Is Like a Surging Sea

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Any inquiry into prose inevitably meets the perplexing example of an illustrious predecessor, M. Jourdain, the famous bourgeois gentilhomme from Molière’s play of the same name. Moved to write an amorous epistle to an unattainable lady, the bourgeois hires a master of philosophy to instruct him in this arcane skill. The master first asks him whether the letter is to be written in verse. Bourgeois that he is, Jourdain rejects that out of hand. ‘You want only prose?’ asks the master. ‘No, I want neither prose nor verse,’ answers the bourgeois, who merely wants a seductive note to be casually dropped at the feet of the lady. But the master is less concerned with the pragmatics or effects of the note than with taxonomic distinctions. ‘It must be one or the other,’ he insists. Expression admits of no other possible

forms. Asked why, the master provides the following rule: ‘Tout ce qui n’est point prose est vers; et tout ce qui n’est point vers est prose’ (Everything that is not prose is verse, and everything that is not verse is prose). M. Jourdain then wonders what it is that he is speaking. ‘Prose’ is the reply. ‘And when I say: “Nicole, bring me my slippers, and give me my nightcap,” is that prose?’ At the master’s affirmative answer, Jourdain marvels at a competence he did not know he had: ‘For over forty years I have been speaking prose without suspecting it in the least.’ He returns, however, to his primary concern, the composition of the note. He suggests its content, a simple cliché, and asks the master to change it around, to couch it in a more gallant manner. The master essays various permutations on the original suggestion but winds up admitting that Jourdain’s initial version was the best, which leads Jourdain to say: ‘And yet I did not study, and I’ve done this on the first try’ (Act 2, scene 4).

Even by the master’s lights (dim as they are), M. Jourdain intuitively arrives at correct expression for his purposes. So what has he learned by learning that he was speaking in prose? No insight was gained here, only a label to be applied to an activity that had not called attention to itself and showed no need of doing so. Yet once
the label is available, it becomes a weapon in the arsenal of knowledge that M. Jourdain can now wield to affirm his superiority over those from whom he seeks to differentiate himself. Thus, when his wife reprimands him for his foolishness, he retorts by beginning to quiz her (Act 3, scene 3): ‘Do you know what you are talking at this moment?’ Madame Jourdain clearly has no idea what her husband is talking about. To his now more refined linguistic sensibility, she appears to be obtusely concerned with matters of content, of evaluation, of pragmatics. ‘What is that called?’ M. Jourdain insists. ‘That is called whatever one wants to call it,’ she replies. Clearly, she fails to understand the value of a label, subscribing to a theory that sees naming as arbitrary. She knows there is no knowledge to be gained here, just some verbal posturing. ‘C’est de la prose, ignorante’ (It is prose, stupid), says the gentleman in triumph, who then goes on to restate for her the opposition proffered by the master that divides the expression of the world into two universes. But whereas the master had offered two mutually exclusive possibilities, M. Jourdain, whose intuitive powers have been rati- fied by the correctness of his own version of the love letters, now unwittingly deconstructs this opposition by showing that verse and prose are not in a relation of opposition and territorial
dominion. He delivers the rule to his wife as follows: ‘Tout ce qui est prose n’est point vers; et tout ce qui n’est point vers n’est point prose’ (Everything that is prose is not verse; and everything that is not verse is not prose). 47

“We may laugh at the bourgeois’s inability to parrot his master’s lesson,” concludes this compelling account of an “illustrious,” inescapable precursor, “but we may well wonder whether, just as he has been speaking prose unwittingly, he may unwittingly state a truth about it.”48 Indeed, what might that truth be, and how might that statement, in its peculiar inconsistency, be said to be of a piece with it?

If verse can be identified with poetry, prose cannot be so easily identified with philosophy. “Poetry possesses its object without knowing it while philosophy knows its object without possessing it,”49 Giorgio Agamben writes, so that “every authentic poetic project is directed toward knowledge, just as every authentic act of philosophy is always directed toward joy.”50

48 Godzich and Kittay, The Emergence of Prose, x.
50 Agamben, Stanzas, xvii.
Perhaps prose could be said to consist in what’s ventured by the proposition: *everything that is philosophy is not poetry, and everything that is not poetry is not philosophy.*