
Part I
Forms

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Poetry, Prose, and the Politics of Literary Form

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The Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and Martin Luther King's Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech all exhibit poetic features in phrasing and cadence, but none is poetry. They are prose documents and it seems unlikely that their authors ever considered framing these great political statements as sonnets or sestinas. John Reed, best known for his journalistic tour de force of the October Revolution in Russia, wrote his fair share of sonnets, but few, if any, of his poems give off revolutionary sparks, whether as a matter of content or as formal experimentation. It is not that poetry is unsuited to politics – witness antislavery verse of the 1840s and 1850s or the poetry of the cultural left of the 1930s – but neither are odes to specific pieces of legislation common literary fare. And yet, when poetry does become outfitted for political purposes, the most significant work may be done not in terms of content but in terms of form.

This chapter seeks to unsettle such misleading oppositions about the supposedly conventional nature of poetic form versus the socially relevant and political possibilities of prose. In no less a defining statement than *What Is Literature?* (1948), Jean-Paul Sartre contrasted the prose writer, who uses words as tools for getting things done in the world, with the poet whose abstruse relation to language makes for compositions whose usefulness is puzzling at best. "Poets are men who refuse to *utilize* language," writes Sartre (5). Poetry appears to Sartre an insular and reflexive métier, one that makes it seem as if the poet "did not share the human condition" (6). In this view, poetry – by its very nature – seems esoteric, removed from the public and collective settings that provide a necessary condition for politics. Although Theodor Adorno would counter that this emphasis upon worldly engagement forces literature

into acceptance of the world as it is, the basic assumptions of Sartre's view are reflected in certain implicit tendencies within American literary studies. Ever since the cultural turn in literary criticism emphasizing the historical and material contexts of writing, the field has prioritized prose, especially the novel, over poetry as though verse were somehow inadequate to representing political crisis. Never mind that writers as diverse as Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frances Harper, Walt Whitman, Claude McKay, and Margaret Atwood have taken up poetry and prose with equal facility. Never mind that for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, poetry written by such luminaries as Philip Freneau, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Lydia Sigourney enjoyed a popularity that often rivaled, if not surpassed, that of novels.

To make these points is not to intone a dirge for 1950s-style formalism or even for poetry. Rather, it is to consider how aesthetic choices become political choices, how opting for either poetry or prose itself constitutes a commentary on the social world and its attendant conventions and forms. Of course, it would seem that in some situations there is no choice at all. Opinions on taxes or the treatment of prison inmates demand everyday expression associated with prose. Philip Freneau, a poet of the American Revolution, did not give into these demands, and such poems as his "Occasioned by a Legislation Bill Proposing a Taxation upon Newspapers" and "On a Legislative Act Prohibiting the Use of Spirituous Liquors to Prisons in Certain Jails of the United States" would seem to test not only the distinctions between poetry and prose but also the assumptions about the politics conveyed by each form. While titles such as "The Wild Honey Suckle" or "To a Caty-Did" reveal that Freneau composed verses on traditional lyric subjects, he also wrote poems on a range of nonpoetic subjects in order to express political views beyond the limits of prosaic wisdom. To be sure, Freneau appears in most anthologies of American literature, but he does so only as a poet. The effect of ignoring his prose is significant, not because his essays and newspaper articles have any special significance themselves, but because Freneau's ability to work in both forms, in tandem with his lifelong indecision about, changing attitudes toward, and strategic deployments of each, suggests something about the nimbleness that political engagement requires. His occasional but sporadic reflections on prose and poetry – What does it mean to frame an appeal in verse? Is prose somehow more democratic than poetry? In the world of public opinion, is poetry an inherently oppositional form? Is prose an accommodation to the world as it is? – offer something like a theory of political form.

Examining the work of this revolutionary-era writer thus supplies much more than a new perspective on the boundaries of eighteenth-century discourse; returning to this "lost" American poet enables a broader consideration about forms of expression within democratic public spheres. Or, as Freneau rhymed near the end of his life, "A poet where there is no king / Is but a disregarded thing," bemoaning that the imaginative, creative qualities associated with poetics seemingly have no place in American democracy (*Last Poems* 31). His lament remains an instructive provocation to examine how literary form – such as the choice of poetry or prose – engages the nature and meaning

of politics at a vital level. This focus on form opens out into a reconsideration of the relationship of literature to propaganda, of art to popular culture, and of aesthetics to oppositional politics, and other issues central to American literary study in the twenty-first century. If Freneau's placement in anthologies suggests that he is a writer who is supposed to help us make sense of national literary traditions, then this renewed attention to the productive tensions between his poetry and prose offers a perspective for reevaluating how form has played an often uncertain but no less determining role in creating the political valences of American literature.

Before undertaking this investigation, a few remarks are necessary to set some parameters about the terms *prose*, *poetry*, and *politics*, especially in their relationship to one another. Rather than separating these terms, the next section suggests why discerning their overlap is crucial to understanding the politics of American literary form.

No matter how much contemporary culture shies away from explicit political discussion as a show of aggression or bad taste, politics are likely to spring up in unexpected contexts from the dinner table to the office water cooler. But while politics have seemingly unlimited range and can appear just as easily in the private space of the bedroom as the public setting of the classroom, politics are not naturally occurring phenomena that simply appear. Thomas Hobbes and other social contract theorists stressed this point by viewing the state of nature, with its unceasing violence and war, as a pre-political setting lacking compacts, covenants, or other forms that give shape and security to political life. This point might be elaborated in terms of the settings thus far invoked – dinner tables (the domestic), bedrooms (the intimate), water coolers (the economic), and classrooms (the institutional) – and by remarking that the communication of politics in each of these zones demands still more forms, from table manners to scheduled coffee breaks. These forms are no guarantee that discussion will adhere to a predictable pattern of style; politics in these settings can be avoided or directly confronted, whispered or shouted, delivered as a confidence or as a rant.

In American literature, the forms for communicating politics are infinitely more varied and complex, ranging from a story of whaling to a fanciful tale about a Kansas farm girl in search of an emerald city. The first example is, of course, *Moby-Dick* (1851), which, starting with readers in the 1960s, was often taken as a commentary on the problem of slavery and the threat of national disunion. The second and equally obvious example is *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), which in its depiction of yellow brick roads, a blustering lion that behaves like a populist orator, and a magical city whose name is the standard abbreviation for “ounce,” recalls the charged political debates over the gold standard at the turn of the twentieth century. With little effort, we might compile a list of novels and poems laden with political messages. In the wake of ideological critique in general and New Historicism and cultural studies in particular, it would be difficult to attempt the opposite and name works that did *not* communicate some political content. Nevertheless, in making claims about the politics of any poem or novel, we would just as quickly want to stipulate that any truly creative work is more than a crude delivery system for an author's political objectives.

The choice of form is paramount not just in conveying content but also in shaping it. To run back through our examples: Why not choose a series of cantos for a whaling saga? Why not choose a realist novel – certainly there were plenty of examples around when Baum was penning Dorothy’s story – to articulate a perspective upon currency debates? Although we know that form matters, authors themselves provide little help in figuring out why one situation calls for poetry and another for prose. Many have speculated, but no one knows precisely why Melville, soon after the commercial failure of *Moby-Dick* and his subsequent novels, turned to an arguably less popular form than the novel by writing poetry in *Battle-Pieces* (1866). Is killing men in a bloody civil war somehow a more poetic subject than killing whales?

In short, any effort to correlate form and political content must recognize the initial conflict and tension that surround the unavoidable use of a particular form. Literature necessarily begins with this gesture, which, however, is not the same thing as saying that literature lacks form until it takes shape as a sestina, sonnet, or short story. As Fredric Jameson points out, “[T]he essential characteristic of literary raw material or latent content is precisely that it never really is initially formless.” Instead of being purely organic, the building blocks of literature – sounds, words, and images – spring from social considerations shot through with history and concrete material reality. Literary raw materials are “meaningful from the outset, being neither more nor less than the very components of our concrete social life itself” (Jameson 402–3). Whether expression congeals as a poem, novel, or other form entails any number of considerations: the circulation of styles and conventions, the literary historical status of genres, the institutions of print culture, patterns of reception, the specifics of the occasion, popular tastes, an author’s talents or predilections, and so on. These aesthetic concerns could be augmented with broader factors stemming from general economic conditions or historical epochs. Since each of these considerations is likely in flux, conventions or tastes are never fixed or static.

In American literary studies, particularly the literature of the early national period, claims about the politics of form lend nuance to what people usually mean by “politics” at the time of the Revolution: the struggles of the Constitutional Congress, diplomacy with France, the danger of factions, the rise of the Federalists, and the opposition of Democrat-Republicans. Considerations of form expand the range of the political. To speak about form and politics, as Jameson does, is not to suggest that literature properly belongs in the domain of what historians or political scientists consider political. Jameson is not asking that literature be classed with more empirically minded disciplines. The goal is not to change the look and feel of literature so that it can appear as social science. Rather, the goal is to shift definitions of politics so that matters like choosing to express one’s thoughts via a poem or a pamphlet are themselves seen as a commentary on social content.

In other words, settling on a form is neither a matter of stylistic idiosyncrasy nor a purely creative decision but is instead a political act par excellence. Jameson underscores this point by reversing the conventional wisdom about form and content. As opposed to viewing form as something that sets the initial pattern to be filled by

content as, say, when wine is decanted into a Grecian urn or words arranged into a sonnet, we should see what happens if we consider form “as that with which we end up, as but the final articulation of the deeper logic of the content itself” (Jameson 328–9). One might go farther still: form is a dynamic process, an ongoing adjustment to and engagement with social and historical content. The choice of the sonnet is itself political even if selecting one form over another seems primarily a question of either functionality (“A sonnet is the best way to express my love”) or taste (“I just like sonnets”) that can be easily put to rest. Just as it makes a difference whether talk of politics at the water cooler or in the bedroom comes as a screed or as a supplication, so too the most fundamental consideration for critical readers is whether literature’s engagement with taxation, prisons (to allude once more to the somewhat mundane range of Freneau’s poetic topics), love, or other issues takes shape as a poem or a treatise.

But in what ways do such choices make a difference? If the preference of one form over another itself stands forth as an expression of social content, if the choice of poetry over prose resonates with potential political significance, then what content is being expressed and what sort of politics are being signified? These questions are potentially rather incautious ones, leading to dubious but familiar assertions about the reactionary nature of diatribes or the progressive nature of the avant-garde. Still, such questions need to be asked lest criticism and interpretation seem mired in an approach to form that proceeds on a case-by-case basis, much as New Criticism often tended to fixate on *a* poem or New Historicism regularly zeroed in on the cultural history of a novel without treating form as a matter of cultural history, too. In his work on “the sociology of literary forms,” Franco Moretti has undertaken this task by linking literary and social convention. Literature, for Moretti, seeks to “*secure consent*” (*Signs* 27), and aesthetic forms are useful precisely in shaping and smoothing conflicts and tensions striating the sociopolitical sphere. Form bends people to the bitter facts of existence: it makes us contented, but with the important proviso that since happiness “is increasingly hard to attain in everyday life, a ‘form’ becomes necessary which can in some way guarantee its existence” (33). From this perspective, form is the afterimage of conflict that has been reconciled and managed; it marks a social suture, indicating the “spot” where aesthetic techniques have been called into the service of restoring an image of consensus. The overall thrust of this argument is that literary form serves a generally conservative function, not by eliminating social tensions altogether, but by expressing them in ways that allow people to adjust themselves to economic, political, social, or existential unpleasantness. Literary form, in short, teaches us that everything is copasetic, and if we accept that proposition then, we are more likely to be happy with the existing state of affairs and our place within it.

Since advancing these claims, Moretti has approached literary form with more nuance, no longer treating it as pure or unchanging to the point that all form fulfills a more or less univocal political mission of exemplifying consensus. Seeking to understand the distinction between novelistic and poetic form, he poses a question so simple

and fundamental that it is often left unasked: “Why are novels in prose?” (“The Novel” 111). He begins with some broad observations about the political and formal differences between poems and novels, which bear upon the politicized readings that are so central to American literary study. Like Jameson, Moretti is not focusing on politics at the level of legislation or other specific issues. Instead, he reads for the politics of form, which in the case of poetry, guided by repeatable pattern and symmetry, seems to line up with social interests that have a high stake in maintaining fixity and order. “Symmetry always suggests permanence, that’s why monuments are symmetrical,” he writes (“The Novel” 112). The architectural comparison is telling, as it suggests that whatever order is implied by poetry, it is a triumphalist one. Verse is retrogressive, its pattern and symmetry always returning expression back to the formal properties with which it began. Prose, in contrast, is progressive because of its indifference to symmetry. Prose is thus antimonumental: at a formal level, the progression of novelistic narrative has a political edge that enlists prose on the side of “im-permanence and irreversibility” with an orientation that is “forward-looking” (“The Novel” 112). If verse and prose were electoral candidates, verse would be the incumbent and prose would be the voice of change and new ideas.

What to make of the political standoff between literary forms in light of the fact that Philip Freneau, once a much-studied author of the early republic and now a figure who has pretty much faded into critical obscurity, was dubbed both the “father of American poetry” and the “father of American prose” (Clark “Poetry,” “Prose”)? Although these sobriquets date from the 1920s, they still have resonance in making us wonder how theoretically opposing forms, each with a different political valence, could be engendered by the same figure. While people often act from ambivalent motives, the formal divisions that striate Freneau’s work are especially germane because his work, both as an essayist and as a poet, is so strongly identified with revolutionary politics. Acclaimed in his own day as the “Poet of the Revolution,” he has since been called a “literary Minute-man” for his readiness to lend his creative talents first to the cause of independence in 1776 and then later to radical republicanism, a crusade he championed until his death in 1832 (Hustvedt 1). Did Freneau’s political attachments fluctuate with the formal decisions that he made, as he selected from an arsenal that included, on the one hand, satires in rhyme, Horatian odes, elegies, and various types of newspaper verse, and, on the other, prose pieces that ran the range from invective to essays voiced in popular vernacular? To what extent did his politics dictate certain formal choices, and how did his use of poetry or prose commit him to certain political positions? As we’ll see, such questions have resonance beyond Freneau and his eighteenth-century moment.

These questions suggest a dialectical approach to the intersections between literary form and political expression. Rather than adopting a unidirectional outlook that would see literary form as determining the type of politics expressed (or vice versa), the tougher challenge is to view both the limits and range of such formal choices as emblematic of a deeper political concern for disseminating information and propagating opinions. Despite their differences, poetry and prose for Freneau each revolves

around the question about how formal conventions respond to the often unpredictable energies of democratic culture. Though Freneau's reputation, in Robert Pinsky's overview, has degenerated from that of a literary freedom fighter in the eighteenth century to "a disreputable hack" in the nineteenth century and now to "an obscure footnote, perhaps an object for that amused condescension the living accord minor writers" in the late twentieth and now twenty-first centuries, his formal and political battles have renewed significance for at least two reasons (10). First, the reaction and response to Freneau, given his avuncular but neglected status, illuminates how American literary history has been shaped by distinguishing literature from propaganda – a line that Freneau repeatedly crossed. Second, and more broadly, Freneau offers new insight into the concerns sketched at the outset of this chapter, namely, the literary forms in which we experience political life today.

At first glance, the measured traditions of eighteenth-century poetry seem out of step with the tempestuous demonstrations, impassioned crowds, and newspaper tirades that were a feature of early American democracy. This irresolvable tension between the medium of European court refinement and popular political culture inspired Freneau to comment directly upon the formal inadequacies of poetry for representing the swirls and upheavals of democratic passions. As the story goes, Freneau simply accepted the defeat of his poetic ideals and redirected his energies toward prose by editing a string of unsuccessful newspapers. To keep the revolutionary fires burning, he began editing the *Freeman's Journal* in 1781, then moved on to the *National Gazette* in 1791, which quickly "became the common clearing house for democratic propaganda" and was just as quickly denounced by Federalists as a Jacobin rag advocating lawless republicanism (Parrington 379). Other ventures included editing and contributing to the *Daily Advertiser*, *Jersey Chronicle*, and *Time-Piece and Literary Companion*, but no matter the venue his reputation as a partisan political tool had been sealed by Federalists, who never missed the opportunity of attacking him – and, to be fair, Freneau regularly invited these attacks – as a rabble-rouser and second-rate maker of verses. "As a journalist engaged in propaganda, Freneau deliberately turned his back on literary aspiration," writes his biographer, Lewis Leary, who, as the title of his book makes clear, considers Freneau's career a "failure" (99). The identification of Freneau as a propagandist relies on assumptions about the political content of his formal choices: had he followed his instincts and not wasted his talents upon party politics and newspaper verse, he might have become the United States' first Romantic poet, an honor that literary critics usually bestow upon William Cullen Bryant, instead of a merely "useful poet," as he was dismissed in the nineteenth century (qtd. in Leary 329), or as the producer of "applied poetry" as opposed to the creator of "pure poetry," as he was judged in the twentieth (Clark, "Poetry" 16).

To say that Freneau churned out propaganda is not to allege that he gave no thought to form. Rather, it is to say that he gave too much thought to matters of form, specifically which forms would best spread a republican gospel of popular political rule while warning against the rise of aristocratic social pretensions in the infant nation. According to the Romantic ideal of the writer, an ideal that would not emerge until

the last decades of Freneau's life, a better, more intuitive poet would not have concerned himself with addressing the masses or adjusting expression to popular tastes. A more accomplished poet would not have wasted precious creative energy considering how verse could be made useful or how poetry could be applied to social and political situations. Only someone with the temperament of an apparatchik and the meager talents of a hack would have devoted so much thought to form in an effort to produce prose and poetry, including verses critical of George Washington, invented satirical speeches spoken by kings, and bits of homespun vernacular calculated to appeal to less genteel audiences. And so it is that Freneau's work often seems calculating, formulated with an eye to what will prove most efficacious in promoting democratic virtue in the hope that Americans of all ranks and classes would join him in asking, "Should we, just heaven, our blood and labour spent, / Be slaves and minions to a parliament?" (Freneau, *Poems* 1:145).

Written for partisan purposes and laden with rather blatant messages, such verse borders on propaganda or, more exactly, renders the distinction between poetry and propaganda inconsequential. As Freneau put it in the "Advertisement" that prefaced the 1809 edition of his work, "These poems were intended . . . to expose vice and treason their own hideous deformity" while promoting "honour and patriotism in their native beauty," and it is not hard to see how lines contrasting brave American military commanders with feckless British generals fulfilled this stated purpose (*Poems Written* 1:3). Attention to form enabled Freneau to think about spreading this message so that *popular* (in the political sense of issues relating to the public) matters would be made popular (in the cultural sense of art and expression that appeal to the tastes of ordinary people). Freneau's use of the term *advertisement* in 1809 is thus perhaps not that remote from contemporary usage that denotes a media spot intended to publicize a product or service. Although the word *propaganda* was infrequently employed before the twentieth century and certainly not with the negative connotations it has today, Freneau and his staff at the *National Gazette* were maligned "propagators of calumny" after the paper printed charges that members of Congress were engaged in underhanded financial speculation (qtd. in Leary 204). What remains unchanging is a concern with spreading messages and propagating information. It is common to conceive of propaganda in terms of content, but Freneau shows that propaganda just as importantly involves the formal strategies used to propel content across the social landscape. Much like the advertiser whose job demands more attention to publicizing a product than the product itself, the eighteenth-century poet, if he believes in democracy as both a political movement and a cultural ethos as fervently as Freneau did, is charged with the mission of thinking about form, especially the respective virtues of verse and prose. How best to get a message "out there" before the public so that it will be truly popular? In taking up this challenge, Freneau discovered that the form of expression proved as significant as anything he might have to say. Recalling the insight that form is not some pre-given pattern with which the artist starts but rather a dynamic engagement with social content, Freneau's work often takes shape as a metacommentary on the possibilities and limitations of poetry

and prose. Form, in these terms, is never merely a formal consideration but rather the historical articulation of a democratic longing to engage people as widely and as fully as possible.

Freneau “became a spokesman for the poor and oppressed and aimed many of his works at the least sophisticated readers,” writes Emory Elliott (136). This aspect of Freneau’s career has often been regretted by critics, leading to the conclusion that the turn to prose assured the defeat of more refined literary aspirations. But the standards important to an eighteenth-century propagandist are not the same as those upheld by modern readers. Freneau’s criteria may today seem quaint and out of date, vestiges of a time when political choices overruled formal concerns. What a more thorough view reveals, however, is that formal concerns are political choices relevant to democracy, not simply as a belief that the people should govern, but as a practice of spreading that belief widely across diverse social strata.

Writing about a different revolutionary moment than Freneau’s, Kenneth Burke in 1935 described the propagandist as a “*spreader* of doctrine” whose central concern should be choosing symbols, vocabulary, and values that will popularize a cause. In “Revolutionary Symbolism in America,” Burke seeks proletarian forms of expression that will extend the writer’s “recruiting into ever widening areas”; the literary artist necessarily becomes a propagandist because he or she propagates ideas and information. When the task is to make political beliefs align with “cultural awareness in the large,” the writer’s duty is to employ language that promotes support for and identification with a particular viewpoint (91–3). As an example, Burke feels that because the designation *worker* is too unromantic and constricted – who, after all, wants to work in the industrial machine? – it needs to be replaced with *the people*, a term that gives off a more inclusive aura. In contemplating which forms would enable the propagation of democratic values and create “cultural awareness in the large,” Freneau often found that the most inclusive aura lay in an odor of the vernacular, as when, in a rebuke to the loyalist printer of the *Royal Gazette*, he rhymed “despot” with “pisspot” (*Poems* 2:124). His wit ran toward New World accents, as when he imagined King George raging like “Xantippe” in reaction to British “losses along Mississippi” (*Poems* 2:118). No matter how clever, though, these “jingling rhymes,” like “the monotony of metre” and other poetic “trifles,” appeared to Freneau as remnants of a dying aristocratic cultural order (*Prose* 310). Poetic forms frequently struck him as too thoroughly steeped in rituals of deference and servility to supply the basis for democratic critique. He worried that the aesthetic forms of the Anglo-American world were good only for trumpeting pomp and circumstance as opposed to making a case for the simple virtues of republicanism. Based on his reading of literary history, Freneau predicted that poetry would be used to reinstall a culture of monarchical deference. After the Revolution, when, as Freneau saw matters, a newly independent merchant class was consolidating its authority and financial speculators were maximizing their opportunities, poets who spent their time composing birthday verses for Washington and extolling government officials were unequal to the task of safeguarding the public’s interests.

In a mock advertisement addressed “To the Noblesse and Courtiers of the United States,” Freneau invited applications for persons of poetic skill willing to sell their talents to the government. Duties included composing verses praising “officers of the government,” but care should be taken since the comparison of the president or anyone in his administration to “any thing on this earth, would be an anti-hyperbole, unsuited to the *majesty* of the subject.” Behind the irony lies Freneau’s disillusionment with poetry as an antidemocratic form. Hopeful lackeys and aspiring bootlickers wishing to increase their chances at becoming poet laureate would do well to bone up on “the causes of decline of all the republics which have preceded us” so as to be ready to rejoice in the appearance of any signs of decline hastening the end of American democracy. Poems are needed to exemplify how hierarchy and “certain *monarchical prettinesses*” such as state receptions, court functions, and official titles augur favorably for “American prosperity” conceived, not in terms of political virtue, but as a crudely financial calculus (*Prose* 294). The content of poetry seems incapable of overcoming the retrogressive nature of its form: in a world where amateur versifiers find work as professional flatterers, poetry fulfills an antipopular function in a double sense, first by being poised against the interests of the people and, second, by appealing to themes over their heads.

This advertisement ran in January 1793, and by August of that year Freneau was writing poetry’s obituary as a “declining art” now that panegyrists and other flatterers were no longer in demand. Then, sounding a more hopeful note, he predicted that “real poetry . . . will one day have its resurrection; but its professors will no longer be court sycophants” (*Prose* 310). This new, real poetry of the future would be guided by “republican virtues,” initiating changes in content, tone, and form. After all, if poetry were ever again to enjoy popularity, its producers had best remember that Americans are a people of “too much cool reflection to be amused” or swayed by poetic baubles dedicated to praising kings and other “crowned murderers” (*Prose* 310). In short, the problem with poetry is no different than what Freneau that same year decried as the royal trappings of the American theater: just as poetry seeks to amuse rather than to instruct or educate, the stage proffers “*alluring amusements*, in order to prevent *the people* from thinking” (*Prose* 295). By way of a broad social critique, these reflections on poetry and theater stress the importance of popular culture in crafting hegemony. In its capacity both to justify a political order and to forestall criticism or dissent, popular culture regularly acts as a stabilizing mechanism, giving the people bread and circuses in the shape of verse and drama, deflecting their legitimate political concerns into pleasing but empty forms. Freneau, it might be said, scorns dramatic entertainment and popular verse as features of an eighteenth-century “culture industry” that offers popular deception in the place of the people’s enlightenment. Although Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer famously invoked the “culture industry” to describe the total alignment of film and radio to capitalist individualism in the post-World War II era, and although the United States in the 1790s certainly lacked the mass media that created a “relentless unity” (*Dialectic* 96) of politics and culture without alternatives or dissent, the comparison remains useful in spelling the scale of

the counterrevolutionary threat that Freneau thought he faced from the very poetic forms he had once employed as the poet of the Revolution (Elliott).

Unlike poetry that bewitched citizens, prose had an instructive and edifying capacity crucial to sustaining republicanism. For Freneau, prose facilitates popular knowledge, spreading colloquial definitions that enlighten instead of amuse. Such optimism led him to conclude that “as the world advances towards universal republicanism the ideas of mankind have become prosaic” (*Prose* 310).

The only complication to this story of republican prose is that Freneau repeatedly voiced regret that poetry lacked popularity in his postrevolutionary world. Ambivalence resounds in his statement about the “prosaic” nature of republicanism since the commentary on republican form also comes laden with the imputation that political ideas expressed in this manner are dull and unimaginative. Counterbalancing the death of poetry that Freneau predicted in his prose writings, his verse often laments the ascendancy of prose along with the fact that rhyme has no creditable place in a democratic public sphere.

The most obvious barrier to poetry as public political expression extends beyond its formal properties to the limitations of an audience, which, in Freneau’s view, seems intent in employing its newly achieved independence and liberty to pursue only narrowly commercial interests that leave neither time nor inclination for more ennobling artistic endeavors. Rhyme automatically dissents from the thinking that aligns the pursuit of gain with the “pursuit of happiness”; the fact that Freneau is on the losing side in this broader ideological war is an injury that he cherishes since the slights and wounds to his aesthetic sensibility allow him to cultivate the air of a tragic and misunderstood visionary. His poetic persona often seems on the verge of giving up:

An age employ’d in pointing steel
 Can no poetic raptures feel
 [...]
 The *Muse of Love* in no request.
 I’ll try my fortune with the rest,
 Which of the Nine shall I engage
 To suit the humor of the age[?] (*Poems* 2:334).

In a day when Erato, the muse of lyric poetry, has no followers and there are no muses specifically devoted to the prosaic business of trade, the poet realizes that his only option is to beseech Melpomene for assistance in producing tragedy and melancholy. For the tragic poet, poetry is itself the source of melancholia. In this new world, poetry lacks creative or instructive power; it appears instead as a passive form shaped by the current climate rather than as a force that can shape the priorities and beliefs of citizens. Still, such self-reflexive content reveals how poetic form registers social action. Poetry, by the sheer nature of its form, is a declaration of opposition to the prevailing consensus that prizes commercialism and limits the imagination to financial speculation. The growing irrelevance of the muses, the threatened obsolescence of verse, and careless regard for lyricism in the early republic combined to make any use of poetic

form a historical protest, somewhere between a sign of surrender and an act of desperation, against a prosaic age.

Poetry counters – which is precisely why it counts. This insight, discovered by Freneau when he stood at the beginnings of a tradition that would later be called American literature, has found echo in the work of contemporary poets. As Rosemarie Waldrop states, “I love the way verse refuses to fill up all the available space of the page so that each line acknowledges what is *not*” (260). While an entire history of experimentation and the avant-garde lies between Freneau and Waldrop, there exists a sort of convergence around the idea of poetry as an oppositional counterforce. To adduce such an effect from form is not to declare that content is irrelevant: rather, the “*not*” uttered by poetry becomes a way of acknowledging and engaging the content of the world, but only as a matter of resistance.

This chapter offers no defense of the artistic worth of Freneau’s poetry. Instead, the point is that for a writer like Freneau who was equally skilled in poetry and prose, the choice of one medium over another, especially a form such as poetry that seemingly was becoming rapidly antiquated, constitutes an act of self-conscious political decision. Poetry also has an imaginative power that enlivens the popular political realm, potentially elevating citizens’ aspirations while widening the ambit of public discourse. For Freneau, its form keeps republican virtue from flowing into the narrow channels of profit and commercialism, and we might update this stance today with small change by saying that poetic form serves people by refusing to accede to the commonsense world. The paradox is that poetry, unlike prose, is no longer a popular form, but this obsolescence is precisely what makes poetry oppositional and especially conducive to minority viewpoints. With prose in ascendancy, poetry, by virtue of its form, is especially suited to the losing side.

In his more hopeful moments, Freneau believed that the United States would produce distinctly democratic verse – even if this development eluded Freneau himself, emerging perhaps not until Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. In a 1797 work later recycled as the introduction to the second volume of his *Poems* (1809), Freneau expressed the sentiment that the United States would one day encourage topics “such, as no courtly poet ever saw.” Here, at last, was the promise for form to match political function, but this possibility for public poetical discourse fades fast in a landscape more suited to the language of business and practicality:

The coming age will be an age of prose:
When sordid cares will break the muses’ dream,
And Common Sense be ranked in seat supreme. (*Poems* 3:188)

Embedded in this familiar rant against an economic calculus lies an unexpected allusion to Tom Paine, author of *Common Sense*, who adopted that title as a pseudonym in newspaper pieces attacking the British during the Revolution. In terms of political sympathies, Freneau and Paine were very much on the same side, and each became the subject of vitriolic attacks after finding fault with the Federalist consensus. On

literary grounds, however, the two had gone their separate ways from the beginning. In Freneau's estimation, Paine's success as a prose pamphleteer belies a deeper failure: while the revolutionary politics of *Common Sense* are beyond reproach, its form is susceptible to hierarchies in which business sensibilities are king. An oppositional politics requires an oppositional form – and that form in a society prioritizing trade and commerce is poetry, a mode of expression destined not only to be on the margin but also to speak the interests of those on the margin.

Even though the situation of American literary study now seems far removed from the poetry and prose in Freneau's day, the revolutionary (and postrevolutionary) moment has much to teach us about the social dynamics of form. Beyond offering insight into the merely manifest content of politics, literary history and literary analysis uncover something more profound, providing a view that is fundamental in addressing how politics are shaped at the outset. By considering Freneau's tense – and often unsuccessful – negotiations of prose and poetry in the analog era of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, we may better equip ourselves to understand, engage, and use the digital forms of politics today. The political conflicts that Freneau routed through the now seemingly archaic oppositions between prose and poetry remain very much a pressing concern for American literary and cultural study in the twenty-first century.

The politics of form attains renewed significance as American literary scholarship explores new forms, and nowhere today is such a development more evident than in graphic novels that are popping up in more and more classrooms. Whether it is the 2006 achievement of Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (nominated for the National Book Award for excellence in Young People's Literature) or Toufic El Rassi's *Arab in America* (2007), the graphic novel reanimates Freneau's concerns about spreading and propagating minority viewpoints. Of course, being a political minority in the early republic is not the same thing as being an ethnic or racial minority in the post-9/11 state, but the linkage between formal choices and public consumption returns us to questions about poetry, prose, and, now, comic books. Why make literature visual? Why graft minority viewpoints to a form that has such currency in popular culture? If the mainstream appeal of visual form itself may be the answer, it is only an ironic one. For Yang, the combination of a racial coming-of-age story and comic panels provides a cunning counterpoint to the idea of a so-called invisible minority. The irony of visual form is more bitter for El Rassi since Arab Americans often occupy a space of hypervisibility and suspicion. Other examples of this burgeoning genre such as *Ex Machina* (which makes explicit reference to September 11, 2001) or *Y: The Last Man* (a catastrophic portrait of gender and sexuality) deeply politicize form by revealing how trauma is, in a word, graphic.

Returning to Freneau brings American literary scholarship forward – to the mixture of poetry, slave narrative, and romance that make up the first African American novel, William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853); to the sonnets that e.e. cummings wrote about wartime patriotism; to the bricolage of biography, newspaper reportage, and stream of consciousness that typify John Dos Passos's experiments in the *U.S.A. Trilogy*

(1938). It may be just as (or more) significant to shift the axis of critical interpretation to form so that the import of these works is not exclusively bound up with slavery, jingoism, corporate capital, or other content. Examinations of form necessarily expand politics beyond the domain of content to considerations of style, technique, genre, and medium. Along this axis, the coordinates for critical interpretation extend to the point where writers and readers decide for poetry, prose, or mixed media, which is also precisely the point where politics begins.

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