

THE PROSE POEM: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

"One Big Prose Poem"

What is prose poetry?

My copy of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines the genre as follows:

PROSE POEM (poem in prose). A composition able to have any or all features of the lyric, except that it is put on the page—though not conceived of—as prose. It differs from poetic prose in that it is short and compact, from free verse in that it has no line breaks, from a short prose passage in that it has, usually, more pronounced rhythm, sonorous effects, imagery, and density of expression. It may contain even inner rhyme and metrical runs. Its length, generally, is from half a page (one or two paragraphs) to three or four pages, i.e., of the average lyrical poem. If it is any longer, the tensions and impact are forfeited, and it becomes—more or less poetic—prose.

The problem with any definition is that, by nature, it limits language and experience; to "define" means to set up boundaries. But some ideas or concepts defy empirical language, and, in fact, are better off viewed free-floating in their respective dusks and dawns. Although the editors of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* recognize this indeterminacy by including the qualifying adverbs "usually" and "generally" in their definition, the sense of authority is still present.

Shying away from strictly formal concerns, Michael Benedikt, in his preface to *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology* (a collection which deserves to be reprinted), lists what he calls "special properties" of the prose poem: its "attention to the unconscious, and to its particular logic"; "an accelerated use of colloquial and other everyday speech patterns"; "a visionary thrust"; a special reliance on humor and wit; and "an enlight-ened doubtfulness, or hopeful skepticism."

Certainly the poetry in *The Prose Poem: An International Journal* exhibits these characteristics, but so does much "verse"

poetry. The antipoetry of Nicanor Parra immediately comes to mind.

So what is prose poetry? To me, it has affinities with black humor. Just as black humor straddles the fine line between comedy and tragedy, so the prose poem plants one foot in prose, the other in poetry, both heels resting precariously on banana peels. Prose poets, no matter how different in sensibilities, wander on this uncertain terrain. It's a land of paradoxes and oxymorons, welcoming the sleight of word artist.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, this verbal trickery sometimes makes a critical appreciation of prose poetry difficult. I remember a critic who once described a particularly troublesome and bleak novel as a "celebration of nihilism." Although I was intellectually pleased by such an elusive oxymoron, I also felt "had," somehow seduced by language. After all, the easiest way to describe something is to say it's everything.

My goal in *The Prose Poem: An International Journal* is to enlarge, not limit, the possibilities of the prose poem, and, like all editors, I've had to trust my instincts. In a correspondence with me, Russell Edson wrote:

I'm always rewriting the prose poems of others as I read. A terrible habit. But it's hard to see the line between my work and the work of others. It all seems one big prose poem. And that's another quality I like about the prose poem. Its not being a projection of personality like so much line poetry tends to be. The ideal prose poem is one in which its author is unknown. As if the prose poem just happened on its own without the midwifery of a particular author.

Following Edson's reflections, I could argue that the best way to describe the work in this journal is to suggest that a prose poem begins on page one and goes to the end. But although this declaration of anonymity and universality (which makes sense to me) is very attractive, I must admit that in my first reading of over 2000 poems, I often selected ones driven by a distinctive voice, a voice demanding attention, one that yelled out, "Hey, try to ignore my vision if you can."

As for practical concerns, *The Prose Poem: An International Journal* will remain an annual. We hope to make it longer next year and include more translations. We also will be receptive to short essays or reflections on the prose poem. We'll receive submissions between April 1st and July 1st of 1993, and we welcome subscriptions at \$8 a year. More than anything, we hope this journal attracts attention to the prose poem, so that more "independent" and university presses begin to publish complete books of prose poetry. There's a lot of good stuff being written.

I'd like to offer a special thanks to James McGovern, Associate Vice President for Academic Administration at Providence College. There would be no journal without his belief in it and without the College's financial support. Finally, I thank assistant editor Karen Klingon who helped me in the final selection process.

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