

THE PROSE POEM: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Volume 8 | 1999

Commentaries: Travel Notes Jay Meek

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Jay Meek

TRAVEL NOTES

I remember Cully: this is what happened there. As the captain turned our launch toward the dock, it was raining. In the rain, the Alps were blue. A man and woman sat together in front of the patisserie and watched a train passing on the hillside, toward Montreux. Seeing a chestnut tree in flower, I could hear everything thrum with the voice of its own kind, like that one tree in the rain, or even the most singular of poems, as it sounds. After we docked, a man and woman got off, but no one waved and no one met them. Then a man in blue uniform drew our gangway onto the deck, and we pulled away. There was nothing more. I made a note of how life shimmered in the town.

We need poems to help us change, and to ease our knowing. Not that a poem should assume more than we know, but allow what we do not know; that it might give to our weaknesses; that it might take us in confidence; that it might enact itself in us; that it might raise us out of ourselves. Even nights when we take it lovingly in our hands, and ease it of its sound, the poem we give our breath to is already assured beyond changing; it is a record of movement accomplished, of hope followed through into knowing. Of flawed perfections. Of conditional

joy—Yes, I was at Cully, and I'll remember it not only for its resonance and the rain but the pleasure I felt in discovering that whatever else it does, a poem will always make the sound of a poem. By this, it exempts itself from its own being, to hold us in mildness and quiet. Reading it, we can be at our best, without apology, and bear our lives in its song.

COMMENTARY

In Michael Benedikt's introduction to *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology* (Dell, 1976), he voices an essential premise of the genre, concerning its "need to attend to the priorities of the unconscious. This attention to the unconscious, and to its particular logic, unfettered by the relatively formalistic interruptions of the line break, remains the most immediately apparent property of the prose poem (48)." But I believe the prose poem is no less capable—and surely

more capacious and unabashed than the lineated poem—of presenting, of representing, heightened states of consciousness. Dressed-down and even at times unassuming, the prose poem has become our casual lyric.

In *The Prose Poem: An International Journal* (Volume 7), Rosemarie Waldrop speaks of wanting to introduce "*inside*" the prose poem the silences that frame verse poems: "I cultivate cuts, discontinuity, leaps, shifts of reference. 'Gap gardening', I call it." A prose poem gathers and extends, not exclusively by image or by syntax, and its measure is not the margin—or the simultaneous course through time and space that the verse poem weaves—but what goes on inside. In place of line and stanza, the prose poem depends upon tone and syntax, particularly for lightness; for it absorbs material much more voraciously than does a verse poem, simply to find its sufficiency and scale. So much to plant, so little time for rest.

"Travel Notes" began as jottings I wrote on a passenger boat making coastal stops on Lake Geneva from Lausanne west to a village on the French border. But it is also a passage through reflections, in which objects flicker in a consciousness that depends on them and declares them, a roll call of the ordinal and familiar—the launch, patisserie, chestnut tree—as each in turn "selves," to use Gerard Manley Hopkins' glorious verb. So, too, a poem is a record of its own making, a registry of its importances, that travels to the heart of each new reader. If it has its end in the writer, it goes out to find its best reader, in whom it lives a while. However different poems might be from one another, however individual we insist they be, they take part in the common experience of "poem" and by virtue of this become exempt from a singularity and strangeness.

Every poem unavoidably resonates with other poems of its kind, as Williams' "By the Road to the Contagious Hospital" does with Wordsworth's "I Wander Lonely as a Cloud." Sometimes, one poem might address other works across generations, as "Travel Notes" means to do by its gesture to Edward Thomas's great poem of motion and consciousness, "Adelstrop." Although some prose poems could otherwise have been verse poems, and some might in fact have begun as verse poems, what is remarkable is that often enough a prose poem cannot be said in any other way. I suspect that such "gap gardening" as "Travel Notes" contains, and such overt statements as it makes, would not have been easily possible in a lineated poem, without some degree of preciosity.

I admire the prose poem for its ability to face readers head on, an attitude less often found in verse poems, and I admire the ease with which a prose poem moves through time. Lineated poems are essentially spatial constructions; motion is at the heart of the prose poem. In "Travel Notes," I made a record of movement through a landscape, but also through an idea, its burden of distance expressed in the phrasing itself, in its cadences, silences, and sounds. But whether a poem is lineated or not, I believe that poems do give their readers the chance to be at their best, when in a consumer culture they are so often taken at something less, and that in reading poems that go all out, or mean to, the readers needn't apologize for giving their best, or for asking it of themselves.

"Travel Notes" from *Windows*, Carnegie-Mellon University Press.