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Book Reviews: Michel Delville's *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre*

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BOOK REVIEWS

Michel Delville, *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, 1998. 368 pp. \$39.95.

Michel Delville's excellent new book on the emergence and evolution of the prose poem in America is in many ways a first and hence deserves to have a wide readership. Building on the insights of such earlier studies as Jonathan Monroe's *A Poverty of Objects* (1987) and Stephen Fredman's *Poet's Prose* (2d ed. 1990), Delville is the first scholar to survey the surprising range of contemporary American prose poems, from the "deep image" epiphanies of Robert Bly, to the parabolic fantasies of Russell Edson and Margaret Atwood, to the "new sentence" works of the Language poets. By juxtaposing such unlikely poets as Charles Simic and Ron Silliman, Margaret Atwood and Diane Ward, Delville nicely undermines the us-versus-them rhetoric that continues, unfortunately, to haunt most critical discourse about contemporary poetry.

What *is* a prose poem anyway? In his introduction, Delville immediately clears the air by announcing that "any attempt at a single, monolithic definition of the genre would be doomed to failure" (see Delville, p. 1). But if one cannot define the prose poem, one can historicize it, a useful project because the past century has witnessed such central and variegated examples, all of them, relating in one form or another, to Baudelaire's great foundational collection *Paris Spleen* (begun in 1855 but not published until 1869). In his preface to these "petits poemes en prose," Baudelaire famously declared that he was after "the miracle of a poetic prose, musical though rhythmless and rhymeless, flexible yet rugged enough to identify with the lyrical impulses of the soul, the ebbs and flow of reverie, the pangs of conscience." This notion of openness, of flexibility and suppleness, Delville notes, comes up again and again in the poets' explanations of their practice and suggests that the prose poem is best understood as a transgressive form: "By testing the validity of our assumptions concerning the nature and function of both poetic and prosaic language, the prose poem inevitably leads us to investigate a number of specific postulates underlying the act of defining genres and, above all, of tracing boundaries between them" (10).

This is not entirely satisfactory, for what happens when, as has largely happened, prose poetry becomes, in its turn, a mainstream genre? Does it then lose its appeal? Delville can't quite get around this conundrum, to which I shall come back later, but, as he is the first to admit, he approaches "the notion of genre itself as a historical rather than a theoretical category" (8), and his central aim, in any case, is to read closely specific prose poems so as to show how they work. Since his focus is on American exemplars, he begins, not, as is usually the case, with Baudelaire and Rimbaud, but with the James Joyce of the youthful "lyrical epiphanies" (1900-1904) and the fragmentary prose pieces published posthumously under the title *Giacomo Joyce*, a sequence that "en-

acts the formal struggle between lyric (self-) presence and narrative continuity" (14).

The case for Joyce as foundational prose poet is ingenious. For one thing, the early epiphanies carry on the aesthetic of the English Decadents (Ernest Dowson, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symonds) who first imported the prose poem from France, and so Delville is able to show that Joyce never made the hard-and-fast distinction between verse and prose that has sometimes been attributed to him. The Epiphanies, moreover, can stand as independent compositions, frequently presenting a "dialogical process between the waking and the unconscious mind" (21). Joyce's dream narrative, Delville argues, seems to correspond to "the Baudelairean ideal of a form freed from the constraints of metrical verse" (22).

The erotic fantasies (prompted by Joyce's infatuation with Amalia Popper, one of his students in Trieste in the pre-World War I years) included in *Giacomo Joyce* are something else again. Delville studies their "Imagist" qualities, their relation to haiku, their parataxis and use of synecdoche, and rightly invokes Roland Barthes's discussion of "arthrology" (the "science of apportionment, division, discontinuity") as an analogue. But Barthes is talking about the fragment, and I wonder if the Amalia Popper entries aren't more properly understood as fragments—another important modern and postmodern genre—than as prose poems. Their disjunctiveness, anticlosure and "decentering of the writing self" (27) recall the fragments of Novalis or Holderlin; the prose poems of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, by contrast, are highly finished forms, circular rather than serial or unfinished.

Still, Delville has interesting things to say about the *Giacomo Joyce* pieces, noting their conflict between narrative linearity and "realism" on the one hand, poetic ambiguity and lyric repetition on the other. It is a conflict that looks ahead to Eugene Jolas's "Revolution of the World" manifesto in transition, the little magazine that published *Work in Progress* (*Finnegans Wake*), as well as many of Gertrude Stein's most experimental works. Delville's placement of *Tender Buttons* and related Stein prose texts in this proto-Surrealist context does much to account for the oddities, eccentricities, and special demands of Steinian prose. For her, as for Jolas and the surrealists, logical sequence is the enemy; her "poeticity" is a matter of the most subtle subversion of the "realist, descriptive" base of "normal" prose (66). "A Purse" for example, "is characteristic of Stein's rejection of the metaphorically laden foundations of conventionally poetic language and of her relish in the literal ordinariness of everyday life" (72). Here and in related *Buttons*, "the disappearance of the lyric self ... indirectly announces the supremacy of the author's voice openly displaying its strategies of self-verbalization and insisting on its constant struggle with the concrete materiality of language" (72-73).

This is very good as far as it goes but, as I have tried to show in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, these texts are also very meaning-full. True, they "subvert" normal linguistic habits, but to say this is not enough for it implies that Stein is engaging in some sort of automatic writing, whereas a close contextual

reading of such pieces as "Glazed Flitter" and "Single Fish" shows that Stein's words are by no means arbitrary; they create new paragrammatic congeries, rich in semantic evocation. Stein, after all, always thought of herself as a "realist," and one of her great admirers was Sherwood Anderson, whose prose poems Delville discusses very ably as writings that tried to bridge the gap between personal and social comment. The chapter on Anderson's and Kenneth Patchen's fusion of Modernist device and a new social realist prose so as to produce a prose poem that would communicate more directly to a larger audience is excellent. And this chapter serves as transition to the "Contemporary Trajectories" that constitute the second half of Delville's study.

A series of chapters focus on the "absurdist" proto-Cubist fables of Russell Edson, the equally absurdist but more surreal than cubist fables of Michael Benedikt, and the more personal feminine versions of this mode as produced by Margaret Atwood and Maxine Chernoff. The work in question is now self-declared prose poetry and Delville gives us careful readings of individual texts, examining, for example, the oscillation between the trivial and the serious in Chernoff's "Lost and Found" (140) or the play of the unconscious in the "poetics of fabulation" that characterized Edson's "The Wounded Breakfast." Throughout this discussion, Delville is careful to distinguish between the truncated narrative, lyrically charged, of the prose poem and the control narrative exerts in the short story.

Robert Bly, by contrast, is regarded by Delville as a "thing poet" in the tradition of Francis Ponge. Here description dominates and each sentence is "an autarchic microcosm in Bly's egalitarian universe" (160). Bly's short, private, intimate block poems often resemble diary entries; their emphasis is on the celebration of the ordinary. As such, Bly's prose poems differ from Charles Simic's (see Chapter 5), which take up the surrealist strain of modernism. His "fragments of terse, mock-gnomic wisdom, his irreverent revisions of classical and modern myth, and, more generally, his comic blending of contradictory ideas, images, and registers often point to the frequently tragicomical realities hidden behind the poems' dissonances." (175). And Delville gives us an especially good account of *Dime-Store Alchemy*, Simic's meditations on Joseph Cornell's tantalizingly mysterious boxes and collage works.

The book concludes with a long (fifty-seven page) chapter on the "new prose poem" of the Language Poets. This chapter could serve as an excellent introduction to Language poetics—its political motives, its ideology, its turn from speech to writing, its creation of what Ron Silliman, one of the founders of the movement, has called "The New Sentence." Silliman's manifesto by that title (Delville reproduces it on pp. 196-97), originally published in 1980, has since been qualified and questioned by such other Language poets as Bob Perelman and Steve McCaffery, but its basic premise—that a sentence in poetic prose is not a unit of logic or argument but an independent element, like the line in poetry, whose relationship to its adjacent units is characterized by polysemy and ambiguity—has produced very interesting results in Silliman's own long poems like *Tjanting* and *Ketjak*, in Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, Rosmarie

Waldrop's *The Reproduction of Profiles*, and many other works by Language poets. In these prose compositions, a given sentence, far from following its predecessor or preparing the way for the sentence that follows, remains relatively autonomous, continuity being provided by word and sound repetition as well as by semantic transfer, in what the Russian Formalists called the "orientation toward the neighboring word."

These New Prose Poems, as Delville calls the pieces by Silliman, Coolidge, Hejinian, and others he discusses, demand a great deal of the reader. I don't think it's quite the case that, as Delville claims, "the readers of a language-oriented poem are theoretically able to construct their own imaginary hypertexts in which they can freely redistribute 'meaning' in a personal, 'writerly' fashion" (203); after all, the reader can only go by what the poet has put into the composition and Language poets are in this sense, just as "controlling" as more traditional ones. As Delville himself admits, later in the chapter, "a so-called areferential poem is never really immune to a return of the syntactic and figurative repressed" (205).

Still, it is Delville's great merit to recognize that, so far as the prose poem is concerned, some of the most exciting, innovative, and wide-ranging "new prose" has come from the Language community. His readings of individual texts by Waldrop, Diane Ward, Barrett Watten, Fiona Templeton and others are invaluable as are his caveats concerning these poets' sometimes too extreme neglect of the specificity of the cultural signified. What I especially like is that Delville is one of the few critics to actually take a text—say, Silliman's *Paradise* or Ward's "pronouncing"—and study its word play and syntactic momentum.

Despite all its virtues, however, *The American Prose Poem* leaves me with a nagging question—the same question I had for Steve Fredman's *Poet's Prose* or, for that matter, for this journal. From Stein to the present, many American "poets" have written in "prose," although all but a handful of prose poetry diehards have also written in "verse." If, as Delville repeatedly suggests, the prose poem is a subversive or transgressive form, challenging the usual genre distinction, why have so many poets, including such "subversive" language poets as Hejinian and Silliman, not used it consistently? After writing *My Life*, for example, Hejinian wrote *The Person*, a radically disjunctive poem, in free verse and then *Oxota*, a long poem-novel in "free" Pushkin stanzas; after John Ashbery wrote *Three Poems* in prose, he wrote *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* in verse, and so on. Indeed, most of the discontinuities, disjunctions, and deconstructions Delville discusses with respect to the prose poetry of the Language poets, are just as prominent in their lineated compositions. And, if one of the functions of the prose poem is to undercut the "tyranny of the signified," as we read in early Language manifestos, why does, say, Clark Coolidge, one of the most difficult and disjunctive of the Language poets, primarily lineate his texts? The same question could be posed with regard to such "surreal" prose poets like Simic.

When Baudelaire opted for the flexibility and fluidity of the prose poem,

he was, of course, reacting against the straightjacket of the alexandrine. But what are poets like Edson and Bly reacting against when they write prose poems? The fluidity and disjunctiveness of Pound's *Cantos*? Williams's *Spring and All*? And why is the New Sentence any more cutting-edge than the New Line or New Page or verbal-visual text?

I don't claim to have answers to these questions but they make me a little leery about claims for a distinct literary form called the prose poem. For it seems to me—and this is the subtext of Delville's long discussion of Language poetics—that the historical "revolution of the word" that has taken us from the decadent poetics with which Delville begins to the late twentieth-century aesthetic of a Rosmarie Waldrop or Ron Silliman has been more significant than the choice of any one formal mode or genre, then or now. Then, too, there is one respect in which the prose poem is quite traditional: its look on the page. Whatever its variations, the prose poem tends to be seen as a block of print, and, as recent work on the computer screen testifies, there is now a strong drive to break up such solid blocks, surrounded as they are by white space.

The "prose poem" may thus be in for some radical transformations of its own. But whatever caveat we may have about Delville's isolation of the genre from other poetic forms, his is a real achievement. He has produced a comprehensive history of the American prose poem that takes us from Joyce and Stein to the immediate present with great skill, finesse, and critical sophistication.

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