

THE BEST OF THE PROSE POEM: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Introduction

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Introduction

In editing *The Best of The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, I feel humble and defensive at the same time. First, I am humbled by my inability to articulate anything close to absolute criteria for my "best of selections. I have read so many prose poems over the past eight years that I feel as if a large gray eraser is squatting in the hollow of my head. I am not even sure what my criteria are, anymore. Some of my contributors would agree with this perception; they have even written to tell me so. Moreover, after reviewing the past eight volumes, I am sometimes disappointed by poems that we have published, and I wonder how many good ones we let go. Since the publication of *Volume 1* in 1992, I have read just about everything written on the prose poem in English. Has that made me a better editor, or has it encouraged me to look at submissions through a distorted critical lens, trying to pigeonhole poems into generally accepted categories? What a terrible failure, what a laughingstock, is the editor who is unable to recognize and to reward the rare visionary poet who succeeds in breaking all the rules—if indeed there are any rules. Yet in spite of these misgivings, I plan to defend or apologize for whatever criteria I have relied on. Readers of Socrates' *Apology* will remember that the Greek word *apologia* means "a defense," though they will also remember, with the sounds of Socrates' rhetoric ringing in their ears, that sometimes the best defense is a good offense.

And so, blockhead, what were you saying about rules? Are there actually do's and don'ts for writing prose poems? Or even more aggressively: Is there even such a genre as prose poetry?

I recognize, of course, the humor in editing a collection in a genre which many intelligent poets and critics do not think exists. To some, I might just as well be editing the galactic correspondences of Mr. Spock. At one Associated Writing Program Conference, a well-known poet approached my exhibitor's table, whereupon I enthusiastically offered him a free copy of *The Prose Poem*. He recoiled as if I were handing him a slimy, homed toad, then smugly pointed out that there was no such genre as prose poetry. "Furthermore," he said, his eyebrows twitching like two oversexed centipedes, "even if there is such a genre called prose poetry, it still isn't *real* poetry." "That's why we call it prose poetry," I responded, arguing that he wouldn't criticize a sonnet for not being a villanelle. He laughed and disappeared into a sea of admirers.

My comparison, of course, was weak, since both sonnets and villanelles do have rules, whereas the most that we can say about prose

poetry is that it exhibits certain characteristics. In this sense, its nearest literary cousin is another oxymoronic genre, black humor. Bruce Jay Friedman writes that attempting to define black humor is like trying to define "an elbow or a corned-beef sandwich" (vii.). Much the same can be said about prose poetry. In the first volume of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, I argued that "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" (6). The critic wrestling with the prose poem-as-genre assumes the same precarious position. For every definitive statement I make on the genre, I recognize the prescriptive flaw in that statement, so that when pontificating on the prose poem, I feel like one of the Three Stooges, alternately slapping myself in the face with each hand:

"The prose poem has its roots in the aphorism."

"But what about the long prose poems of Baudelaire?"

"But surely all prose poems are fables."

"Then where do you situate the 'poetic prose' written by certain Language poets?"

Take this, take that. Whoof! Bang! ...

Concerning literary definition in general and prose poetry in particular, Russell Edson, in "Portrait of the Writer as a Fat Man," states, "We are not interested in the usual literary definitions, for we have neither the scholarship nor the ear. We want to write free of debt or obligation to literary form or idea; free even from ourselves, free from our own expectations.... There is more truth in the act of writing than in what is written..." ("Portrait" 38). Edson's scorn for literary pigeonholing also appears in a recent statement on genre distinctions. "What name one gives or doesn't give to his or her writing," he says, "is far less important than the work itself ("Interview" 86). Was Frederick Schlegel right, then, when he argued that "Every poem is a genre in itself (Monroe 245)? Yet, as many recent critical studies on the prose poem suggest (see our bibliography at the back of this volume), it does seem worthwhile to look at some definitions and characteristics of prose poetry offered by poets and critics.

E. M. Cioran writes, "To embrace a thing by definition, however arbitrary... is to reject that thing, to render it insipid and superfluous, to annihilate it" (7). It seems that most prose poets would agree with Cioran. Averse to the crippling, straitjacket mentality associated with definition, they circle the prose poem as if it were a crocodile. Instead of nets, they rely on metaphor, trusting in the analogical slices of our brains, which naturally embrace oxymoron and paradox. In a special

issue on the prose poem in the journal *Verse*, Charles Simic states, "Writing a prose poem is a bit like trying to catch a fly in a dark room. The fly probably isn't even there, the fly is inside your head, still, you keep tripping over and bumping into things in hot pursuit. The prose poem is a burst of language following a collision with a large piece of furniture" (7). Simic's comparison captures both the spontaneity and the frustration involved in writing a prose poem. Like Simic, Louis Jenkins is awed by the mystery of composition, but his metaphor seems safer and more homemade. "Think of the prose poem as a box," he writes, "perhaps the lunch box dad brought home from work at night. What's inside? Some waxed paper, a banana peel, half a peanut butter-jelly sandwich. Not so much a hint of how the day has gone perhaps, but the magic for having made a mysterious journey and returned. The dried out pb&j tastier than anything made flesh" (1). And then there's Edson, who compares the prose poem to a "cast-iron aeroplane that can actually fly, mainly because its pilot does not care if it does or not."

Nevertheless, this heavier-than-air prose monstrosity, this cast-iron toy will be seen to be floating over the trees.

It's all done from the cockpit. The joy stick is made of flesh. The pilot sits on an old kitchen chair before a table covered with an oilcloth. The coffee cups and spoons seem to be the controls.

But the pilot is asleep. You are right, this aeroplane seems to fly because its pilot dreams....

("Portrait" 38)

Edson's metaphor and his comment on literary definition are attractive to poets because he champions the unconscious and the personal imagination in its attempt to escape literary and cultural contamination. "There is more truth in the act of writing than in what is written" ("Portrait" 38). Yes! Yet is it possible at this point in time to write in a genre unaware that it really is a genre, or to be ignorant of other established genres that it resembles—in our case, the parable, the fable, the aphorism, the *pensée*, and so on? "Where do genres come from?" Tzvetan Todorov asks. "Quite simply from other genres. A new genre is always a transformation of an earlier one, or of several; by inversion, by displacement, by combination" (15). Whether or not we agree with Todorov, it's clear that many poets and critics have taken a similar approach to the prose poem. Margueritte Murphy wants to free the prose poem from verse, pointing to the "nonliterary language" of

Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen*, with its "political idioms" and "slang of the streets," both of which thwart the critic's attempt to define prose poetry by "relying on the dominance of poetic functions, such as rhythm or metaphor" (89). She argues that the prose poem "remains formally a prose genre," then adds that prose poetry is ruled, "as all genres are, by tradition, if only to undermine it" (63). Whether or not the prose poem likes it, Murphy suggests, it must subvert those genres to be "other."

Charles Simic also recognizes that the prose poem is a "literary hybrid,"

an impossible amalgamation of lyric poetry, anecdote, fairy tale, allegory, joke, journal entry, and many other kinds of prose. Prose poems are the culinary equivalent of peasant dishes, like paella and gumbo, which bring together a great variety of ingredients and flavors, and which in the end, thanks to the art of the cook, somehow blend. Except, the parallel is not exact. Prose poetry does not follow a recipe. The dishes it concocts are unpredictable and often vary from poem to poem.

("A Long Course" 15)

Indeed, any successful description of the genre seems to include this element of unpredictability. When I first began writing prose poems and consciously considering prose poetry as a distinct genre, I thought of the platypus, that lovable yet homely Tasmanian hybrid, but then came to see the weakness of that comparison. The platypus's genetic code is predetermined. It can't all of sudden grow an elephant's trunk out of its backside, that is, unless it ends up in a Russell Edson poem. In contrast, the prose poem's possible transformations are endless.

If there is such a creature as the prose poem, and if its existence depends partly on its ability to plunder the territories of many other like genres, then perhaps we can discuss it in terms of some recognizable tradition and look at the "traditional" prose poem as having certain characteristics. Michael Benedikt, in the introduction to his groundbreaking anthology, *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology* (will some visionary publisher ever reprint this wondrous collection?), provides some general characteristics which continue to be useful. First, Benedikt traces the modern prose poem back to the French Symbolists and to Robert Bly's "Looking for Dragon Smoke," the latter essay explaining the new direction in which American poetry was moving during the 60s and 70s. Then he gives a "working definition" of the prose poem, arguing that it "is a genre of poetry, self-consciously written in prose, and characterized

by the intense use of virtually all the devices of poetry, which includes the intense use of devices of verse," except for the line break (47). Finally, he lists what he calls the "special properties" of the prose poem: its "attention to the unconscious, and to its particular logic"; "an accelerated use of colloquial and everyday speech patterns"; "a visionary thrust"; a reliance on humor and wit; and an "enlightened doubtfulness, or hopeful skepticism" (48-50).

Michel Delville, in the only complete study of the American prose poem, *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre*, recognizes the usefulness of Benedikt's "properties" but also points out their indebtedness to the Surrealist tradition because they privilege the unconscious, and thus best describe the prose poetry of writers whom Delville calls "neo-Surrealists," such as Edson and Benedikt himself. An obvious problem occurs because many prose poets are not Surrealists; they may even loathe the movement. Unlike Benedikt, Delville argues that he

will approach the notion of genre itself as an historical rather than a theoretical category, that is, by drawing inductively on an existing body of contemporary works labeled, marketed or simply received as prose poems, rather than by establishing a prescriptive construct which would precondition [his] attempts to come to the terms with the texts themselves. (9)

We have to look beyond "the existence of generic boundaries as such," Delville writes, "to look for similarities and differences between individual works. As Paul Hernadi writes, 'things may be similar in *different respects*'" (10). And Delville does an excellent job tracing the history of the American prose poem from the influence of James Joyce's "epiphanies," through the short prose of Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, and Kenneth Patchen, up to the "fabulist" and "deep image" schools, team-taught by Russell Edson, Robert Bly, Michael Benedikt, David Ignatow, Maxine Chernoff, and Charles Simic. Delville also discusses at length the "prose poem" associated with the Language school of poetry—a "poetic prose," which, from my point of view, can be problematic, since many of its practitioners and apologists often disparage the "traditional" prose poem of such fabulators as Edson. The title of Stephen Fredman's excellent study, *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, shows how far some critics will go to avoid the term "prose poetry," which term Fredman writes, "remains redolent with the atmospheric sentiment of French Symbolism" (10). Indeed, the distinc-

tions he makes between the "traditional" prose poem and "poet's prose" allow him to illuminate, in a way Benedikt's "properties" cannot, such texts as William Carlos Williams' *Kora in Hell*, Robert Creeley's *Presences: A Text for Marisol*, John Ashbery's *Three Poems*, and David Antin's "talk poems." By the time we finish Fredman's study, it is difficult to even look at the above works as prose poems. And so, again, we come full circle.

I have provided this overview of recent approaches to the prose poem for two reasons. First, I want to argue that so much critical literature on the prose poem may itself suggest that prose poetry is not only a "real" genre, but that it also has a tradition. Secondly, in terms of my criteria for choosing poems, I must admit that besides all the prose poems and fables and fairy tales and parables and prose fragments I have read over the years, I have been influenced by the above critical approaches to the prose poem. Although they haven't provided me with guidelines, they have created a context from which I must draw, even if I do so unconsciously. To me, literary theory, like philosophy, provides few answers; instead, and perhaps more importantly, it creates an endless internal and external dialogue which forces us to constantly reevaluate our standards. I honestly do not know, nor do I care to know, how this dialectic affects the writer. From reading Robert Bly's "The Prose Poem as an Evolving Form," I am aware of his division of prose poems into fables, poems of illumination, and object poems. From reading Jonathan Monroe's *A Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre*, I have learned to look at the prose poem from a sociocultural perspective, and Monroe has altered the way I read such writers as Novalis, Baudelaire, and especially Max Jacob and Francis Ponge. And certainly, one of the first major studies of the prose poem in English, *The Prose Poem in France: Theory and Practice*, edited by Mary Ann Caws and Hermine Riffaterre, influenced my original conception of the prose poem-as-genre. But, again, I cannot say how all this reading, along with the correspondence and conversations I have had with other poets on the "nature" of the prose poem, has affected my own writing. I still feel as startled as a newborn kitten by what appears on the page. Even if it stinks. I have come to trust in my imagination as a poet, just as I have come to trust in my judgment as an editor. Write the prose poems, reread the masters of the genre, delve into the critical material, then take a deep breath and open those envelopes, hoping a wee bit of literary competence has been acquired. Certainly, if I look hard enough, I can categorize the prose poems we receive; they will be poems of illumination, or formal prose

poems, or object poems. The writers themselves will be neo-Surreal-ists, or Language poets, or Midwestern raconteurs. But even if these writers self-consciously embrace such schools, I know that most of them never think of these designations when they sit down to write. So I, too, must look at each poem as if it *is* its own genre, and I believe my assistant editors and I have tried to read submissions in this open-minded fashion. That's not to say we don't see common, fatal errors in prose poems. The enemies of any good poem will always be sentimentalism and a morbid self-consciousness. And let's not forget self-indulgence, verbosity. Certainly, I have no desire to create an "us" (prose poets) versus "them" (verse poets) mentality, especially since ninety-five percent of the poets in this volume write in both forms, yet it is frustrating when many contributors, most of them already accomplished verse poets, seduced by the so-called freedom of the prose poem, cavalierly write, "I have read and enjoyed your journal, so I thought I'd dash off a few prose poems for your consumption." To us hardcore prose poets, these writers might just as well be saying, "I thought I'd try brain surgery on myself, drunk and blindfolded." If the free verse poet must be more demanding on herself than the sonneteer, then the prose poet must be merciless. "Too much language chasing too little of an idea" ("Interview" 89), Edson has said, and we nod our heads in agreement, knowing that we reject most submissions because they are overwritten.

All the poems included in *The Best of The Prose Poem: An International Journal* have avoided the above flaws, or, I hope, have succeeded in spite of them. In the introduction to *Volume 1*, I wrote that "I often selected [prose poems] driven by a distinctive voice, a voice demanding attention, one that yelled out, 'Hey, try to ignore my vision if you can'" (6). Whether the prose poets included here have privileged form over content or vice versa, whether they are Surrealists or Language poets, minimalists or maximalists, I probably have chosen their poems for the same reason I made my choices in *Volume 1*. Are my selections more informed now than they were eight years ago? Who knows. Perhaps Edson, again, offers the best answer to all the questions I have raised and have deliberately left unanswered. "The world's a strange place," he tells us, "it helps to think of oneself as a secret agent" (88). Not a bad metaphysics for the prose poet.

At this stage in the journal, it seems appropriate to thank a number of people. First, I thank Providence College for publishing *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*. I have been fortunate to work un-

der a number of intelligent Vice Presidents and Associate Vice Presidents. First, there was Dr. James McGovern, who provided the initial funding for the journal. Next, past Vice President Rev. Thomas McGonigle gave me a course reduction at a time when the journal doubled in terms of workload. Finally, current Vice President Dr. Thomas L. Canavan, an English professor himself, has given both moral and financial support as the journal continues to grow.

I also need to thank my two assistant editors, Karen Klingon and Brian Johnson, who helped me make final selections in the first eight volumes, and who sometimes helped read through the general submissions. Karen, an artist, poet, and children's writer, read for the first four volumes. Her intolerance for affectations kept many a bad poem out of the journal. Brian is, quite simply, one of the best readers of poetry I have met. It has been a pleasure to reprint some of his own prose poems in this volume because he had to give up that privilege when he became an editor. Moreover, there would have been no *Volume 5* if Brian hadn't lugged all the submissions back and forth to me after I broke a vertebra and was housebound. Both he and Karen pulled me away from my Darvocet and reruns of the original *Wild Wild West*. Thanks to Don Soucy, too, an old friend, who took charge of book reviews and some of the proofreading. Also, I must mention Bob Booth, Cathy Walsh, Janet Masso, and all the students who helped in various ways, especially Jean Hopkinson, Chris Macli and Talia Danesi. Finally, I applaud my contributing editors who somehow knew I wouldn't embarrass them.

I could go on and on mentioning all the prose poets who have been supportive over the years, but I'm sure I would leave someone out, so I will end here by offering a final thanks to all of you who have sent us work and money, and who have encouraged me to keep editing this journal.

Please note that we will begin reading for *Volume 10* on December 1, 2001. There will be no volume published next year.

Peter Johnson

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