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The prose poem and the microessay

Abstract:

Despite the growing popularity of such new generic labels as the 'microessay', the proximity of the prose poem to neighbouring speculative prose genres has been the focus of little critical attention. This paper investigates the interplay between lyrico-poetic and expository prose while bearing special attention to the specific historical and cultural circumstances of the birth of the Baudelairian prose poem.

Biographical note:

Michel Delville teaches English, American, and comparative literature at the University of Liège, where he directs the Interdisciplinary Center for Applied Poetics (http://labos.ulg.ac.be/cipa). He is the author or co-author of *The American Prose Poem* (1998), *J.G. Ballard* (1998), *Hamlet & Co* (2001), *Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart, and the Secret History of Maximalism* (2005), *Eating the Avant-Garde* (2009), *Crossroads Poetics* (2013), *Radiohead: OK Computer* (2015), *The Politics and Aesthetics of Hunger and Disgust* (2017) and ~~*Undoing*~~ *Art* (w. Mary Ann Caws, 2017). He has also published several poetry collections and edited volumes of essays on contemporary art.

I was recently asked to supply a brief quote for the author's page devoted to my work as a poet on the *Versopolis* website. After a few minutes of hesitation and slight confusion as to what my creative output as a 'prose poet' meant to me – as well as what it could possibly mean to an audience familiar with the generic turmoil of contradictions and complexities of contemporary poetry – I wrote down the following description of what I viewed as my main preoccupations and interests as a creative writer:

> I am mainly a prose poet. What I do is write very short stories for people with a short attention span alongside very short essays for people who have no patience for full-length philosophical treatises.[1]

Looking back on it, this self-portrait of the prose poet as a writer of 'instant essays' and 'micro-stories' seems both apt and misleading, at least if taken at face value. It is true that the 'speculative' prose poem (for want of a better word) as practised by myself and others often resembles a short, unfinished essay. It could also be argued that the prose poem's success story can be credited, at least in part, to its apparent simplicity and accessibility, which makes it an easy way for readers to consume poetry, a genre perceived by many as abstruse and confusing. That is not to say, however, that prose poems – even when they display an essentially discursive and essayistic disposition – are devoid of some of the features often associated with poetry in the modern/contemporary sense (ambiguity, ambivalence, indeterminacy, opacity, complexity, polysemy, musicality, language-centeredness, you name it). Here is an excerpt from my recent *Anything & Everything: Prose Poems and Microessays*, a collection of imaginary 'portraits' of famous writers and artists ranging from Montaigne to Damien Hirst:

> MARCEL DUCHAMP
>
> A thermometer and a cuttlefish bone with nothing in the mix from Montale. A cage filled with cubes stamped Made in France. Mannerisms in the absence of style. One day or another, the nominal sentence will eventually outskin ambient minimalism. *This makes it art.* The readymade neither deceives nor cheats. To the touch, the material remains constant. The strength of objects answers a new classicism, patient and monochrome. Then comes the opposite feat. Sugar hardens into diced metamorphic rocks' varicose faces. How many angels on the head of a pin? Speculation prevails through a kind of anorexic euphoria. The most stubborn among us will imagine the plumage of the absent bird. (Delville 2016: 32)

Readers familiar with Duchamp's work will instantly understand that this poem is about the artist's ready-made *Why Not Sneeze Rrose Sélavy?* – a bird cage containing marble cubes resembling sugar cubes, a thermometer and cuttlefish bone. They will pick up on (and hopefully prolong) the half-sketched reflections on the legacy of found art and ready-mades, which include thoughts about proto-minimalism and the dangers of the solidification of anti-art gestures into so many aesthetic mannerisms. (Even) more astute (or 'stubborn') readers might spot a reference to Eugenio Montale's *Cuttlefish Bones* in the opening sentence, a quote from Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* ('*This makes it art*'), and a tribute to Duchamp's Mallarmean poetics (the 'absent bird' echoes the 'clear ice-flights that never flew away' of the 1887 poem 'The Virgin, the Vivacious, and the Beautiful Present Day'). As for the sugar cubes hardening into

marble, they can be elucidated in the light of the artist's pronouncement that the cage is 'filled with sugar lumps ... but the sugar lumps are made of marble and when you lift it, you are surprised by the unexpected weight. / The thermometer is to register the temperature of the marble' (Duchamp, cited in Mink 1995: 7). One the purposes of this microessay is indeed to imagine how Duchamp's installation would *feel* if museum visitors were allowed to open the bird cage, hold it with one hand and reach for its contents with the other. Perhaps only by approaching the work through other senses than the sense of sight can one hope to resist the temptation of counting angels dancing on pinheads ...

This close reading does not really tell us what a 'microessay' is or is not, but it does convey a sense of how speculative thought can be used and, some will argue, abused in a format which simultaneously celebrates essayistic prose and undermines it, so to speak, from within. 'MARCEL DUCHAMP' thus approaches the condition of Michelle Dicinoski's 'lyric essay', which 'like lyric poetry, from which it draws some of its techniques ... is concerned with ambiguity' and 'constantly posing the conundrum of its own existence: What should an essay do? What should it offer?' (Dicinoski 2017: 10). By resisting the syllogistic movement of descriptive prose, and by opting for a disjunctive and paratactic style while privileging free association over expository coherence, 'MARCEL DUCHAMP' multiplies, rather than reduces, the vectors of meaning generated by its object of study. We have known since Jakobson that the 'poetic' function of language interacts with referentiality in a way which does not obliterate reference but, rather, allows for reasoning on ambiguous, fragmentary and uncertain knowledge. The result of this process is more opaque, denser and, one might say, more 'difficult' than a paragraph taken from a more conventional, full-length academic essay on Duchamp. George Steiner has claimed that difficulty can be understood as 'an interference-effect between underlying clarity and obstructed formulation' (Steiner 1980: 18). According to Steiner, this interference creates a kind of rupture of 'continuities between linguistic intention and utterance', poetry being 'knit of words compacted with every conceivable mode of operative force' (1980: 21). Seen from this angle, the 'poetic' function of 'MARCEL DUCHAMP' can be said to reside in the struggle between words and what they mean to say. It also lies in the tension between the apparent user-friendliness of the prose paragraph and the level of syntactic and semantic hesitation conveyed by its very language, which is bound to remain detached or decentred, to use a more fashionable term, from our first impression of the poem's content.

I would maintain that some readers may be attracted to the prose poem format, whether of the speculative or narrative variety, because they have no patience or time for longer forms. What happens when they start to read the poem, however, is a rather different experience and is likely to prompt as much questioning as answering, the prose poem being, by definition and by necessity, a mongrel genre combining lyric and analytical, private and public content in varying measures and combinations and thus torn between the utilitarian and the autotelic vocation of its own discourse. In the best of cases, these hybrid textual creatures, far from closing the reader's mind, are likely to encourage a different, more associational, para-critical reading which some see at work in 'microessay' writing.

Critics of the prose poem, and I include myself in the lot, have described the form as a genre which emerged as a reaction against dominant poetic forms, 'a critical, self-critical, utopian genre, a genre that tests the limits of genre' (Monroe 1987:16), a genre which is representative of 'how literary forms conceal traces of their own underlying aesthetic contradictions, including the fact that such meta-genres as "poetry", "narrative" and the "lyric" are always already contaminated by the traces of other generic categories they tend to subscribe to or exclude' (Delville 1998: 9). In France, the growing popularity of the French prose poem in the second half of the nineteenth century – since Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen* (1947 [1869]) – is in direct proportion to its capacity to break through the metrical and rhythmic constraints of the Alexandrine. If one had to account for the prose poem 'revival' which took place in the United States from the 1970s to the 1990s (Russell Edson, Michael Benedikt, David Ignatow, Charles Simic, Language and post-Language poetry …), something similar could be argued about the potential of the genre not only to enact a continuation and re-evaluation of familiar French Symbolist and Surrealist paradigms but also to respond to, pastiche or subvert other genres than traditional, versified poetry – genres which like fiction or the essay, are more or less exclusively associated with prose literature. Perhaps this is why Edgar Allan Poe described his 1848 cosmo-philosophical treatise *Eureka* as a 'prose poem', a term he used to convey the singular hybridity of a 'Book of Truths' offered to the reader, 'not in its character of Truth-Teller, but for the Beauty that abounds in its Truth; constituting it true' (Poe 1997: 3). His insistence on the necessity to consider his poem-essay 'on the Material and Spiritual Universe' as 'an Art-Product alone:- let us say as a Romance; or, if I be not urging too lofty a claim, as a Poem' (1997: 3) reflects the struggle between poetic ambiguity and the objective value of the essay that is still typical of many recent prose poetry works combining critical, philosophical, and lyric material pointing in the direction of a work suspended between an ideal of self-sufficient, self-directed poeticity and the syllogistic imperatives and contextual discursiveness of the essay.

Despite the increasing popularity of the term 'microessay', the proximity of the prose poem to neighbouring speculative prose genres has been the subject of very little attention or reflection outside creative nonfiction writing programs over the last, say, thirty or forty years. The essays devoted to the 'personal' or 'lyric' essay contained in the Spring 2017 issue of *TEXT* prepare the ground for a (re)consideration of the relationship between prose poetry and expository prose. They have done more to help us understand the specificities of the short (or 'lyrical') essay writing than the countless guides for 'Writing and Publishing Creative NonFiction' which have appeared in the last few years. In their Introduction, the editors Rachel Robertson and Kylie Cardell begin by quoting Robert Manne:

> I had thought of an essay as any brief piece of non-fiction prose. I no longer do ... For me at least, an essay is a reasonably short piece of prose in which we hear a distinctive voice attempting to recollect or illuminate or explain one or another aspect of the world. It follows from this that no essay could be jointly authored. It also follows, that, with an essay, we trust that the distinctive voice we hear is truthful or authentic, even when perhaps it is not. (2017: ix)

The emphasis here is as much on the personal, distinctive voice of the essayist as on (vague) considerations of required length. To say that an essay should be 'reasonably short' rather than 'brief' does not mean much and bears echoes of similar controversies surrounding the generic status of the 'short short' vis-à-vis the short story, or, for that matter, the narrative, 'fabulist' prose poem à la Edson or Ignatow. To be honest, for many of us, the only intrinsic quality that distinguishes a discursive prose poem from an essay is precisely its limited length, just as what ultimately distinguishes sudden fiction from a short story is its narrative scope and, ultimately, its sheer word count (a couple of pages for some, 2500 words according to Irving Howe), which is well below the usual length of a short story. Further in the issue, the dissolution of boundaries between creative and essayistic writing promoted by writers of 'lyric' essays is explored by Michelle Dicinoski's chapter on Rebecca Solnit and Maggie Nelson, which argues that their book-length works can be regarded as long lyric essays insofar as they 'construct an essaying "I" whose associative approach presents not just a view of the world but a method for viewing the world' (Dicinoski 2017: 1). Dicinoski proceeds to examine different uses of juxtaposition, association, and citation (in the manner of Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*) in these works, and concurs with Brenda Miller that many writers 'have tried to pin down the lyric essay, defining it as a collage, a montage, a mosaic', an aspect of their work that 'recognize in the lyric essay a tendency towards fragmentation that invites the reader into those gaps, that emphasizes what is unknown rather than the already articulated known' (Miller cited in Dicinoski 2017: 2). She also argues that Solnit's and Nelson's respective uses of characterization are 'found in the character of thought itself: in how it leans, and with whom, and how it leaps and connects, and how it makes its wild associations' (2017: 11), a definition that is entirely in tune with Baudelaire's dream of 'a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience' (Baudelaire 1947: ix).

Whereas Judith Kitchen identifies as the 'musicality of devices such as alliteration and assonance, and other devices of poetry, such as metaphor and repetition' (Kitchen, cited in Dicinoski 2017:2) as key features of essayistic writing, Leslie Jamison notes that, as 'a genre grounded in productive uncertainty – collage rather than argument, exploration rather than assertion' – the 'lyrical' essay can stand accused of 'maintain[ing] a tenuous grasp on rigor and momentum': 'When does associative thinking feel productive – establishing important connections, peeling away layers, dissolving boundaries between registers – and when does it feel evasive, gliding over one idea too quickly in order to tackle the next?' (Jamison 2013: n.p.).

These various attempts at defining the lyrical essay have the refreshing, albeit disquieting effect of reminding us that Baudelaire's prose poems were equally informed by the need to convey the mechanics of the mind itself and that they were inextricably linked with the development of journalistic prose (and its 'dispersed' layout and design on the page), at a time when the circulation of French newspapers had increased dramatically and constituted a valuable source of revenue (forty out of the fifty pieces that compose the volume were published in journals and magazines, some of them in such popular daily venues as *Le Figaro* or *La Presse*, which published the first twenty poems of the collection). In his study of symbolic resistance in nineteenth-century

France, which includes extensive chapters and sections about the rise of the newspaper culture, Richard Terdiman insists on the resemblances between the fragmented, disjunctive structure of Baudelaire's collection and the principle of 'ordered disorganization' (1985: 122) which prevails in the newspaper format. More than a century before the birth of attention span and cognitive development theories, Baudelaire – commenting on the work's lack of fixed linear telos and describing the book as having 'neither head nor tail, both head and tail, alternately and reciprocally' – writes in his Preface to *Paris Spleen*:

> how admirably convenient this combination is for all of us, for you, for me, and for the reader. We can cut wherever we please, I my dreaming, you your manuscript, the reader his reading; for I do not keep the reader's restive mind hanging in suspense on the threads of an interminable and superfluous plot. (Baudelaire 1947: ix)

In doing so, Baudelaire is not merely attempting a desperate career move (he was hoping to turn his collection into a financial success, which he badly needed at this stage in his career): more importantly, at least in the context of this paper, the prose poem's rejection of the continuity of 'plot' extends the author's critique of lyric self-containedness to a critique of the linear, teleological transparency of essayistic prose as well as of accepted institutional divides between high and low genres and discourses. As Jonathan Monroe aptly puts it, the prose poem effects a 'broadening of the dialogical [struggles enacted in Novalis and Schlegel] from a virtually exclusive focus on struggles *within* high culture to include a concern with struggles *between* high and low culture' ('including the languages of poetry, prose, salesmanship, private ownership, the artist's milieu, religion, social unrest, history, philosophy, myth, philanthropy, social theory, and political confrontation; the languages as well of adults and children, men and women, rich and poor – which is 'crucial to the social reinscription of the lyric that the prose poem advances' [Monroe 1987: 102]). Addressing the paradoxical dialectics of closed and open form within the collection, Monroe concludes that:

> as resolutely cohesive in its individual texts as it is fragmented as a collection, *Le spleen de Paris* marks the persistence of organicist notions of form even as it begins to effect the break with such notions later manifest in the more radically *anti*-organic texts of a Rimbaud or a Mallarmé. (1987: 102)

It was that same Stéphane Mallarmé who as early as the 1870s prolonged Baudelairian prose poetic revolution and began to experiment with the possibilities poetic reportage. The proximity of French Symbolist prose poems to articles and 'faits divers' and the possibility of converting 'poetic' blocks of prose into sellable commodities liable to 'please' and 'amuse' the reader (Baudelaire 1947: ix) is also underlined by both Terdiman and Monroe as a symptom of modern poetry's gradual departure from art for art's sake to 'a means for acquiring both an audience and an income' (Monroe 1987: 97).

As Baudelaire's foundational example shows, the shifting destinies of the prose poem and essayistic writing were inextricably linked from the genre's very first inception. Baudelaire's (at least in part) financially motivated obsession with author/publisher/reader relationships already signals a departure from the traditional essayistic writing, one which place the emphasis on the potential of volume and page

space to reinvent and reach a new readership which, in Baudelaire's time, largely reflected the rise to hegemony of prose in a world dominated by bourgeois interests and ideology (which arguably included a demand for brief nonfiction textual units which were easy to consume at one sitting between meals and working hours). Rather than trying to answer the idle question of whether, say, Montaigne and Cioran were prose poets, or that of whether Charles Simic and Rosmarie Waldrop write 'sudden' essays, one can only hope that future studies of the prose poem and essayistic prose will take these considerations as a starting point for a discussion of the specific cultural, political and institutional practices which govern patterns of (counter-)discursive and/or generic domination, marginalisation and resistance. Only by considering genres primarily as cultural/literary institutions responding to social as well as aesthetic issues can one hope to effect a full confrontation with the historical and material circumstances and necessities which preside over the creation, rediscovery and refashioning of old and new literary genres regardless of fashionable generic labels or designations.

Endnotes

1. http://www.versopolis.com/poet/90/michel-delville.

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