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What titles tell us: The prose poem in the little magazines of early modernism

Abstract:

This essay takes up the question of the prose poem as a marginal genre in British and American modernism and examines its presence in the little magazines during the second decade of the twentieth century through 1920. Employing Gérard Genette's notion of the 'paratext', I look at the function of titles in establishing or suggesting genre. While direct references to the 'prose poem' or 'poem in prose' are rare, titling practices perform a number of functions that shape possibilities for the genre. Translations of poetry in prose form appear, and their titles, in identifying the source, draw on past literary traditions, thus legitimising poetry in prose. Titles that employ analogies with other art forms assert a status for the texts as art, and suggest ways of reading them. Finally many titles evoke an ontology of the partial, the fleeting, and the fragmented, while the prose poems play out these modernist themes and demonstrate the form's experimental edge.

Biographical note:

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During the early decades of the twentieth century, a time when Modernism was flourishing, a time when experimentation in literature and art was valued in and of itself by many young writers, the prose poem in English had a marginal presence. Although the form rose to prominence with modernity, linked to the urban scene through Charles Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris: Petits poèmes en prose*, British and American poets of the generation following the *fin-de-siècle* more frequently turned to *vers libre* or free verse as they experimented with form, strove to incorporate contemporary language into poetry, and represented experience in the modern city. Recent history no doubt played some role: there was a discrediting of the prose poem as a leftover from decadent francophilia, charged both with a certain preciousness and a taint from the Oscar Wilde trials. The most prominent voice here is that of TS Eliot in his essay 'The Borderline of Prose' where he argues an 'inner necessity' that divides prose from verse (1917: 159). His rhetoric of sharp distinctions and ridicule of *fin-de-siècle* holdovers echo the lessons of his Harvard professor, Irving Babbitt, in *The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts*.[1]

Even among the avant garde, the presence of the prose poem was in some respects obscured. Little magazines critical to the emergence of Modernist poetry identify themselves as organs of 'verse' even though prose poems do appear occasionally in their pages: prominent in this regard are Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* and Alfred Kreymborg's *Others: A Magazine of the New Verse*.[2] And prose poems are seldom identified as such. Julia Nelsen observes:

> Perhaps one of the reasons why many critics have claimed that the form went missing in the early 1900s is because the term *prose poem* itself largely disappeared. Those writing prose poems for the little magazines rarely employed that label, preferring more ambiguous, inclusive terms to set their texts apart from the *poème en prose* and reflect the pluralistic artistic possibilities of the medium. The titles of the vast majority of prose poems appearing in modernist journals evoke other forms of the language arts, as well as painting and music: Fragments, Impressions, Sketches, Etchings, Prints, Notes, Improvisations. (2010: 59)[3]

The prose poem has been associated with other art forms since its beginnings – see Baudelaire's own acknowledgement of a forerunner in Aloysius Bertrand's *Gaspard de la nuit: Fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot*. Yet the use of generic titles like those cited by Nelsen may well indicate an enthusiasm for experimenting with genre, part of the reinvention of poetry undertaken at this time, without acknowledgement of the French tradition of *poème en prose*.

This essay takes up Nelsen's point and examines the titling of prose poems in several modernist little magazines as indications of their generic status or aspiration. I employ a notion theorised by Gérard Genette, the 'paratext', in considering the impact of titles. He defines the 'paratext' as that which reinforces and accompanies the text, 'a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations'. These 'productions' '*present'* or '*make present*' (Genette's emphasis) the text (1997: 1). Thus the paratext is a:

> *threshold* … a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition, but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the

> public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (1997: 2)[4]

To highlight the role of the paratext, Genette asks: ‘limited to the text alone and without a guiding set of directions, how would we read Joyce’s *Ulysses* if it were not entitled *Ulysses*?’ (1997: 2) If we look at prose poems that do not specifically align themselves through titling with the French tradition of *poème en prose*, what dynamics appear? How does a title act as a ‘threshold’ and ‘zone’ of ‘transaction,’ preparing a reading of the text, or alerting the reader strategically to features of the text? What is the effect of titles that, like *Ulysses*, ally texts with ancient literary traditions, or titles that reference modes of expression in other art forms? Do these titles signal a poetic text, or do different semiotic work? Finally, how might the titling of these texts have shaped an understanding of what poetry in prose could do amid the ferment of literary experimentation and discussion of the role of poetry in the early twentieth century?

Translations into prose

I will begin with a category that both may not seem to fit the genre and is uninteresting in its titling: translations of verse into prose. Here titles typically perform identification of the original rather than suggestive naming. But this practice of translating verse into prose is significant in the history of the prose poem. Suzanne Bernard describes the importance of eighteenth-century translations of foreign poetry into French prose as precursors of the French prose poem (1959: 24-29). As she notes, such texts, in and of themselves, make the point that versification is not synonymous with poetry. We can discern a similar dynamic in the translations of poetry in the form of prose published in the little magazines of modernism: regardless of the interest of the translator in promoting the prose poem, such texts present the prose form as a legitimate vehicle for poetry. Ezra Pound’s translation of a poem by troubadour Daniel Arnaut, ‘En Breu Brisaral Temps Braus’, is one such example, appearing in the 15 February 1912 issue of *The New Age.* The title that heads Pound’s contribution is not that of the poem, but one for a larger project of Pound’s, ‘I Gather the Limbs of Osiris’; part of a longer essay, the poem translated into English prose is identified simply by its title in Provençal. In fact, the surrounding essay is one of a series appearing under this title in *The New Age*.[5] James Longenbach explains the meaning behind the title for the larger work:

> Pound uses the myth of Isis and Osiris as a metaphor for his historicism in *I Gather the Limbs of Osiris.* According to ancient Egyptian legends (and Plutarch, who first told the story in a complete form), Osiris was murdered, and his body rent into fourteen pieces and the pieces scattered across the land. Isis, his sister and wife, traveled abroad gathering the limbs…. In identifying himself with Isis, Pound represents his work as the resurrection and reclamation of the dead. (1987: 47)[6]

Translation, then, is an act of reclaiming the dead, to borrow Longenbach’s expression, and the title in Provençal signals its distance from the present day, evidence for the contemporary reader of just how necessary such resurrection is. These translations are part of Pound’s larger project to reform modern poetry in part through a recuperation

of particular past works. Pound introduces his translation with an explanation of why he uses prose this time:

> I may be able to show more precisely the style of his language – now that I have conveyed the nature of his rhyme schemes – by giving one translation in prose. Beyond its external symmetry, every formal poem should have its internal thought-form, or at least, thought progress. This form can, of course, be as well displayed in a prose version as in a metrical one. (1912: 369)[7]

Pound's aim in revisiting the poetry of the past is to learn from it. In this case, he would illuminate the structure of thought in the admired poem. He clarifies the importance of such structure later in the essay:

> we must have a simplicity and directness of utterance, which is different from the simplicity and directness of daily speech … This difference, this dignity, cannot be conferred by florid adjectives or elaborate hyperbole; it must be conveyed by art, and by the art of the verse structure, by something which exalts the reader, making him feel that he is in contact with something arranged more finely than the commonplace. (1912: 370)

Although no apologist of the prose poem, Pound uses prose in his translation – and 'a simplicity and directness of utterance' – to highlight an aspect of the sort of 'art', the structure he values in poetry, that he offers as a model for contemporary composition.

Another poet and close friend of Pound's, Richard Aldington (whose prose poems are the immediate target of Eliot's critique), published a number of translations of 'the Latin poets of the Italian Renaissance', to quote the description beneath the title 'Amaracus', appearing in the 28 November 1912 and 9 January 1913 issues of *The New Age,* some of which are in prose. In *The Egoist* of 1 December 1915, all the translations are in prose, appearing under the general title 'Latin Poems of the Renaissance' with individual authors and titles for each work. In the December 1916 number of *The Egoist*, Aldington offers translations of 'Pastoral Epigrams by Marco-Antonio Flaminio (1498–1550)' with a note asking 'a certain indulgence for these translations and for this note. They were written at odd moments in the somewhat noisy and unfavourable surroundings of a barrack-room'. That is, Aldington produced these translations while serving in the army during the war, and so his interest in 'these little poems' in which he finds a fair share of 'pedantry' but also 'a genuine emotion struggling through the stifling folds of academic imitation' (1916: 180) itself carries pathos. Aldington is perhaps the most prolific prose poet of the writers publishing in the little magazines, so these exercises in translation undoubtedly influence his own poetic production. Like Pound, he is resuscitating a past poetic art in which he finds value, offering it to the contemporary reader in prose form.

Poetry translated into prose also offered a vehicle for little magazines to expand their content beyond western works. Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* published 'Poems' by Rabindranath Tagore in prose form in its December 1912 issue and two in prose form among verse in June 1913. In an editorial comment in the December issue, Pound identifies Tagore as the translator of his own poems and he calls their publication 'an event in the history of English poetry and of world poetry' (1912: 92). Although Pound goes on to praise at length their artistry in the original –

'in metres perhaps the most finished and most subtle of any known to us' (1912: 92) – Tagore's choice to translate his verse into prose draws no mention, a sign of its acceptance as practice. The only title that appears for the translations is 'Poems'; individual works are assigned roman numerals.

The translations of poetry into prose discussed so far are hardly remarkable in their titling, but the titles have important functions: Pound's use of the original title in the original language confers a certain authenticity while Aldington's titles also situate the origin of these poems in a somewhat obscure past, making the act of translation a revival of a presumably little known or nearly forgotten tradition. The designation of Tagore's contemporary works as 'poems' makes clear that this prose is in fact poetry. In all these cases, poetry in prose becomes a vehicle for the English reader to experience poetry that might not otherwise be available and is a way for modernisers like Pound to provide models for contemporary writing from other eras and cultures.

There is yet another kind of translation in prose: quasi-translations that pastiche a foreign style and diction, but without an author in the 'original' language. Allen Upward's 'Scented Leaves – From a Chinese Jar' opens the September 1913 issue of *Poetry*. (Of the thirty poems included, 28 are in prose and two are in verse.) 'Leaves', as with Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, employs a pun (from trees/books), although the Chinese jar as repository suggests hermetic preservation, rather than the more typical bucolic connotation of 'leaves'. But the source, or 'jar,' is not identified, leaving the reader to wonder what their provenance might be. In the 'Notes' section of that issue, the information that they 'are not direct translations, but paraphrases from the Chinese' appears, but no Chinese poet is named (1913: 228). Pound then wrote to Harriet Monroe on 23 September 1913 to correct this note: Upward 'says, by the way, that the Chinese stuff is not a paraphrase, but that he made it up out of his head, using a certain amount of Chinese reminiscence. I think we should insert a note to that effect, as the one in the current number is misleading' (1950: 22–23).[8] Upward himself gives an account of composing and concealing these works in his autobiographical poem, 'The Discarded Imagist': 'I set to work and wrote little poems … Then I hid them away for ten or twelve years, / Scented leaves in a Chinese jar' (1915: 98). Thus the poet interprets the title of his previously published prose poems: it refers not to the preservation of antique poems, but rather to his own concealment of his compositions and a consequent delay in publication.

Upward's prose poems are openly orientalist, with references to Asian antiquity: the lead poem, for instance, is titled 'Kublai and the Linnet'. In this group, most of the titles are nominal, naming people or things that are then given significance through the poem. For instance, the second prose poem, 'The Acacia Leaves', identifies the role of these leaves in differentiating how a son perceives time in contrast with his 'aged' father: 'The aged man, when he beheld winter approaching, counted the leaves as they lapsed from the acacia trees; while his son was talking of the spring' (1913: 191). The poem that seems to name a time of day – 'The Night' – is more readily construed as an ornate, symbolic description of the night sky than a meditation at night-time. It begins: 'In the hall of ebony there grows a tree with golden tassels' (1913: 195).

Pound was an admirer of Upward's works and included nine of the 'Scented Leaves'

in the first Imagist collection, *Des Imagistes: An Anthology* (1914).[9] A different group of prose poems by Upward appears in the 15 May 1914 number of *The Egoist* as *Chinese Lanterns*, suggesting the power to illuminate, reminiscent of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. Again the titles tend to name people as types – 'The Conjurer', 'The Mad Biologist'; or things – 'the Coffin', 'The Plum-Blossom Shower', 'The Waterlily'. While some titles imply an exotic nonwestern subject matter, the focus on objects and their potential for poetic resonance supports the emerging aesthetic, articulated as Imagist, that values the concrete over abstractions. One poem, however, has a French title, 'Réclame', the word for 'advertisement', curiously harking back to the nineteenth-century French prose poem's appearance in newspapers, particularly the *feuilleton* section, vying for space with ads.

In all, with these translations and pseudo-translations, the prose poem provides a form through which nearly forgotten poetic traditions, a refreshed sense of poetic art, and poetry from non-western cultures are made available to Anglo-American audiences. Practices associated with Imagism, for instance, are drawn from the recuperation and updating of a reservoir of archaic poetry, be it Provençal, Renaissance Latin, or ancient Chinese. In light of this interest in the antique, it is not surprising to find contemporary prose poems with archaic titles. Aldington writes his own 'Epigrams': two in prose appear in the 1 February 1916 number of *The Egoist.* Arthur Crossthwaite publishes 'Three Eclogues' in the second issue of *Rhythm*, Autumn 1912. Morris Ward's 'Prose Coronales' appears in the May 1917 issue of *The Little Review.* And the category of 'fable', important to the brief narrative prose poem of the nineteenth century, appears in *Coterie* in December 1920 with GM Bessemer Wright's 'Three Fables'. In a similar vein, John Cournos's translations of 'Little Tales' by the Russian writer Feodor Sologub are published in the 1 January 1916 and December 1916 issues of *The Egoist.*

The parageneric: new categories for poetry in prose?

In contrast with the archaic and the cultural capital such titles bear are the more contemporary 'genres' of poetry in prose proposed through titling: 'blue-prints', 'silhouettes', 'sketches', 'notes', 'night pieces', 'nocturnes', 'impressions', 'improvisations', Genette would term such categories '*parageneric*' in that they 'display a sort of genre innovation' but do not refer to a recognised formal genre in the way that titles like 'odes', 'hymns', 'epigrams' or 'elegies' do.[10] Parageneric titles could give rise to a new genre, but in practice they do not: 'If our own period were not more enamored of originality than of tradition,' Genette quips, such titles 'like Montaigne's *Essais* (which broke new ground) could have given rise to a sort of genre formula' (1997: 86). There are, in fact, two ways in which such titles appear in the little magazines: as the titles of single poems, or as the titles of series of poems which may then have individual titles or are designated as individual texts through numbering. I will focus on the second instance as the more '*parageneric*' as the grouping of several texts under a specific generic title more strongly suggests the textual kinship that constitutes genre.

We find in these titles both the tentative categorisation and pursuit of innovation Genette describes. In the fluid, avant-garde context of these little magazines, such

parageneric titles set the stage for the texts that followed, suggesting how they might be read rather than providing an outright definition of new genres or claim to new forms in the mode of a manifesto.[11] First of all, there is usually a lack of explanatory framing. It is left to the title and the texts to make clear what is going on, the meanings to which their interaction gives rise, the 'transaction' – to use Genette's term between titling and potential readings of the texts. (One possible and fascinating exception to this lack of explanatory paratext is the publication of William Carlos Williams' Prologue to his *Improvisations* in *The Little Review*, which I take up later.) Secondly, the generation of such categories may have been encouraged by a frequent practice in the little magazines of introducing a sequence of poems, in verse or in prose, with a heading while the individual works then carry their own titles. For instance, Jane Heap's 'Sketches' are individually titled 'White' and 'Void' in the November 1917 number of *The Little Review*. Aldington publishes three 'Fantasies', two in prose, one in verse, with individual titles in the 1 March 1916 issue of *The Egoist*. Harriet Dean's 'Silhouettes' include 'Barn-Yarding' and 'Departure' (*The Little Review,* June–July 1916: 13). This practice also is a way of identifying prose poems as poetry when introduced with the generic 'Poems'. For instance, Jessie Dismorr's prose poems appear as 'Poems' in *The Little Review* in August 1919, and with a significant twist, her 'Poems and Notes' – as if to imply that these short texts are both poetry and observations – head a group of prose poems (including 'London Notes') in the second number of *BLAST*, July 1915.

What work do these parageneric labels do? Certainly some associate the prose poem with other art forms. 'Notes' suggests not only jottings, but also musical notes. Sherwood Anderson's 'Mid-American Songs' (*Poetry,* September 1917) alternate prose and verse, highlighting their basic musicality and equivalence to musical vocalisation. The title of 'Three Nightpieces' (John Rodker, *The Little Review* July 1917) may imply musical pieces as well as fragments. And William Carlos Williams' *Improvisations* (appearing in several issues of *The Little Review* between October 1917 and June 1919) suggest jazz riffs while recalling paintings by Wassily Kandinsky whose *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* Williams quotes in his prologue. Explicit references to visual art include 'sketches', 'etchings', 'silhouettes', and 'blue-prints', while 'landscape' appears in the title of individual prose poems.[12]

Such titles then may assert that the prose poems have their own music or offer a performance equivalent to that of music; or that they represent pictorially like the visual arts, although it may be a form of visual art that has abandoned perspectival representation for abstraction. There are, however, other ways to interpret these parageneric titles. Many imply that representation is partial: 'Blue-Prints' gives an outline and starting point; 'silhouettes' only the outline; 'etchings' provides lines while suggesting depth (engraving) and permanence; 'sketches' are incomplete, drawn quickly, of the moment, as are 'impressions'; 'fragments' may stand for the whole, or may just be remnants, the shards of a lost whole.[13] Ben Hecht goes so far as to use 'Dregs', the utter leftovers, as a title. Titles also identify artistic practices, or means of representation: again 'improvisation', 'sketches', or 'fantasies'. So a particular ontology of modernism is intimated by these titles: a sense of being limited to the partial, the fleeting, the momentary, the glimpsed, the immediate sensation – thereby more authentic – and in the focus on artistic process (improvisation, sketching, noting)

and what lies behind it ('fantasies').

To get a better sense of how these titles may prepare textual readings, let's look closely at a few examples. Under 'Blue-Prints' this prose poem by Harriet Dean appears:

> Debutante
>
> You are a faded shawl about the shoulders of your mother. A puff of wind catches at your fluttering edge to jerk you away. But she draws you close, growing cold in the warm young breeze. She holds you with her shiny round pin, as all young ones are clasped to old by round things grown shiny with age.
>
> In your wistful tired eyes I see the trembling of her shawl as she breathes.
>
> (*The Little Review* January–February 1916: 7)

First of all, the prose poem records a present, with present tense employed throughout. The speaker is an observer, present in the 'I see' that reads the debutante's 'wistful eyes.' This use of tense and the articulated presence of the observer brings immediacy to the described experience. This immediacy also surprises as instead of a description of a young woman, a debutante as the title of the prose poem indicates, we find her mother's shawl vividly evoked even as it functions metaphorically. A 'blue-print', of course, is a blue and white design, a ghostly anticipation of a projected whole, an outline and a start. So while the speaker's language denotes presence, the parageneric title implies a tentativeness and incompleteness. 'Blue' also may pun on being 'blue,' sadness. 'Debutante' implies a start, here ironic as the 'debutante' is 'faded' with 'wistful tired eyes'. The central sadness has to do with how the young woman as 'shawl' clings to the old, while another 'wind,' 'a warm young breeze', would 'jerk' her away. She is held by the 'clasp' of the old, which is realised in the 'shiny round pin', and thus she is weakened: she trembles so that her mother may breathe. It is a 'blue-print' in that a central image and metaphor, the daughter as shawl, forecasts a regressive dynamic where the daughter is caught in an instrumental role and a 'blue' future. That is, the metaphor of daughter as mother's shawl is a 'blue-print' for the relationship and the trajectory of the daughter's life. The second poem under 'Blue-Prints' by Dean is in free verse. Including prose poems and free verse poems under a single rubric, hence as equivalent poetic compositions, was not uncommon in the little magazines, another sign that form alone no longer defined 'poetry'.

Like 'Debutante,' Jane Heap's prose poems have a minimalist aesthetic, employing few metaphors, but powerfully, as they 'sketch' glimpses of Chicago:

> SKETCHES
>
> jh.
>
> White
>
> I.
>
> Sharp, empty air . . . Out of the black mouths of engines white smoke rises on thin stems into white ghosts of ancient trees; together they rise into ghosts of ancient forests, sway and surge and are gone again a million years.
>
> II.

> The hot air of the day stays in the city until night. The long slope of my roof presses the heat down upon me. Soon it will rain. But there is no rest in me: my heart is wandering too far. My friends may still be in the city, but I do not seek them. I go to the animals in the park. Within their enclosures black shadows of camels lie in the darkness. A great white camel broods in the moonlight, apart from the rest. His lonely eyes are closed and he moves his head slowly from side to side on his long neck, swaying in pain, searching in a dream for his lost world. I have seen a Norwegian ship carrying its carved head through the waters of a fjord with such a movement . . . .
>
> Now the high clouds cover the moon. Out on the lake a wind assails the layers of heat. A white peacock sits in a tree aloof, elegant, incorruptible . . . A light green spirit . . . Across the first thunder he lifts his long white laugh at us like a maniac.
>
> Void
>
> I cannot live long in your city: it has no zones of pain for me where I may rest, no places where old joys dwell and I may suffer. It is as empty for me as the honeycomb cliff cities of the Southwest. For I shall not know love again in this or any place.
>
> (*The Little Review*, November 1917: 5)

The first prose poem, ‘White,’ begins with the blank page of the sky, ‘Sharp, empty air’. But not only does the poet ‘sketch’ a scene, but the smoke sketched is sketching. The play of black and white is both simplifying and dramatic as the white steam from engines becomes ‘white ghosts of ancient trees,’ a transient tracing of a spectral forest out of industrial pollution.

The second part of the poem moves the focus to the subject as if to make clear that the purpose of this text is not only to represent a momentary scene, but also the impression upon the human subject. Indeed, the focus is on sensation – how the ‘long slope of my roof presses the heat down upon me’. Yet this situation sets up conflict between sensation and will as the subject resists the effect of these pressures; despite the heat or the promise of rain, ‘there is no rest in me.’ The movement of the subject, then, may not be controlled by the change in the weather, but the weather and the passage of the day inform experience for the subject and animals she visits, reinforcing the sense of transience and of the many fleeting images despite any assertion of will. ‘White’ riffs on ‘white smoke’, ‘white ghosts of ancient trees’, ‘a great white camel’, ‘a white peacock’, and finally its ‘long white laugh at us like a maniac’. Whiteness here is associated with loss (‘ghosts of ancient forests’ and the ‘lost world’ of the camel) and the ephemeral, for even the confined animal, the white camel, is ‘white’ because lit by moonlight.

The second poem, ‘Void’, maintains the focus on the speaking subject and works through negatives: ironically an absence of ‘zones of pain’, of ‘places where old joys dwell’ makes the city ‘empty’ and intolerable. Nothing of the city is sketched besides the analogy with ‘the honeycomb cliff cities of the Southwest’ as figures for emptiness. Instead of visual representation, sketching comes to mean notations for a blank state of

mind and loss of affect. Clearly Heap's 'Sketches' reinterprets the tradition of sketching to mean tracing the immaterial and emptiness as well as the transitory. While the parageneric title suggests a relationship of text to the 'real', the seen, the prose poems, in exploring the nature of sketching, challenge belief in the efficacy of what is seen and felt – or sketched – to represent fully.

As noted earlier, for most of these parageneric series, titling alone functions to describe or designate the status of the prose. In the case of Williams' 'Improvisations,' however, an explanation does appear in the form of a 'Prologue' in two issues of *The Little Review* – April and May 1919 – after the initial publication of three Improvisations in the October 1917 issue and 18 Improvisations plus a 'coda' in the January 1918 number. Thus we are offered a window into the thinking behind a parageneric title that names an artistic process. (Williams, however, was not the first to use 'Improvisation' as a title for poetry. Louis Gilmore, for instance, published lineated poems with that title in the June 1917 and December 1917 issues of *The Little Review*; the re-use of the title confers already a parageneric potential.)

Significantly, the first instalment, 'Prologue: The Return of the Sun,' conveys the tentative nature of the parageneric title. The essay opens the issue, a sign of the editors' recognition of its worth or at least of its interest to the readers of *The Little Review*.[14] It gets mention even on the cover, announced as 'A Prologue, by William Carlos Williams' (the only other works named on the cover are 'Drawings by Stanislaw Szukalszki' – without the comma and so indicating reference to the drawings themselves, not their title). In the table of contents, it is listed simply as 'Prologue' with Williams as author. But a prologue of what? The first mention even of improvisation does not appear until page 3 in a reported response by Walter Arensberg to Williams' question about 'the more modern painters': 'He replied by saying that the only way man differed from every other creature was in his ability to improvise novelty'. Only on page 5 does a direct reference to Williams' Improvisations appear: 'When Margaret Anderson published my first Improvisations Ezra Pound wrote me one of his hurried letters in which he urged me to give some hint by which the reader of good will might come at my intention.' Finally the reader is cued into the reason for this essay and to what it may serve as a prologue.

What the reader does find at the beginning is a quasi-apology, not for the difficulty of the Improvisations, but for the 'broken style' of the 'prologue': 'The sole precedent I can find for the broken style of my prologue is Longinus on the Sublime, and that one far-fetched' (April 1919: 1). Williams, however, will argue that brokenness has aesthetic value as a sign of innovation, as Arensberg's visual arts' example of improvised novelty shows:

> Thus according to Du Champs, who was Arensberg's champion at the time, a stained glass window that had fallen out and lay more or less together on the ground was of far greater interest than the thing conventionally composed in situ. (April 1919: 3)

At the beginning of the prologue, however, what does follow his recognition of a 'broken style' are anecdotes about his mother. (The Improvisations also represent the 'Return of the <u>Son</u>', in that as an artist he will emulate her.) He begins with her propensity to get lost when in Rome: 'By turning to the left when she should have

turned right, actually she did once manage to go so far astray that it was nearly an hour before she extricated herself from the strangeness of every new vista and found a landmark' (April 1919: 1). And later, 'Thus seeing the thing itself without forethought or afterthought but with great intensity of perception my mother loses her bearings or associates with some disreputable person or translates a dark mood. She is a creature of great imagination' (April 1919: 3). Getting lost, following the vagaries of the streets, drawn to 'the strangeness of every new vista', focusing on the thing and thereby losing one's 'bearings' – thus Williams presents the methodology of his Improvisations. The 'Prologue' takes up this wandering style, although to a lesser degree than the Improvisations themselves. And Williams does eventually define what he is up to in this first instalment of the 'Prologue', but in response to Pound's and HD's remarks, and in contrast with Wallace Stevens, as if in conversation, not exposition:

> The attention has been held too rigid on the one plane instead of following a more flexible, jagged resort. It is to loosen the attention, my attention since I occupy part of the field, that I write these improvisations. Here I clash with Wallace Stevens. (April 1919: 8)

In other words, Williams' explanation of his Improvisations, and his creative method, is no more prescriptive than the example of the shattered stained glass window.

The second instalment of the 'Prologue' in the May 1919 issue of *The Little Review* is identified parenthetically as 'Prologue to a book of Improvisations now being published by the Four Seas Company'. But it opens with Williams' admission of what it does not do. In an age of manifestos, he is too late to the game:

> I wish that I might here set down my 'Vortex' after the fashion I live here, there, or elsewhere or succeed in this, that, or the other so long as I can keep my mind free from the trammels of literature, bearing down every attack of its *retiarii* with my *mirmillones*. But the time is past. (May 1919: 74)

This sentence is confusing because part of it is omitted – accidental breakage is not so helpful even in prose that adopts a 'broken style'. The version that appears in the book is clearer:

> I wish that I might here set down my 'Vortex' after the fashion of London, 1913, stating how little it means to me whether I live here, there or elsewhere or succeed in this, that or the other so long as I can keep my mind free from the trammels of literature, beating down every attack of its *retiarii* with my *mirmillones*. But the time is past. (1920: 18)

Besides discarding the Oxford commas and correcting 'bearing' to 'beating', Williams restores the reference to London 1913. Characterising his resistance to 'literature' as a gladiatorial combat, he is also clear that it is not a battle he is waging as a member of Pound's circle, with their manifesto, 'Imagisme' by FS Flint and 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', by Pound in *Poetry* 1.6, March 1913, or with the announcement of a new movement like Vorticism as in the first issue of *BLAST* in 1914. As defensive as this opening seems, it affirms that his Prologue will not be a list of formal prescriptions, like the Imagiste essays, but rather is a paean to a creative method that loosens constraints and follows the twists and turns of the mind driven by the incidentals of daily experience.[15] Williams presents Improvisation less as a new genre than as a way

of breaking up habits of seeing and thought in the cause of creativity:

> The imagination goes from one thing to another. Given many things of nearly totally divergent natures but possessing one-thousandth part of a quality in common, provided that be new, distinguished, these things belong in an imaginative category and not in a gross natural array. To me this is the gist of the whole matter … But the thing that stands eternally in the way of really good writing is always one: the virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose. (April 1919: 8–9)

If Williams had written a defence of the Improvisation as a new form, like Amy Lowell's and John Gould Fletcher's defences of 'polyphonic prose', would that have constituted the launch of a new genre? Perhaps, although Lowell's works in 'polyphonic prose' finally did not produce a generic legacy, and are generally anthologised as 'prose poems'. On the other hand, Pound's 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', TE Hulme's 'Lecture on Poetry', and other like canonical essays prescribing how to write in a modern age did transform the writing of poetry in English. Free verse came into broad use, although its early twentieth-century defenders pointed repeatedly to an already long history in English poetry. Lacking a manifesto in English, or some variation thereof, the prose poem nonetheless persisted as it grew out of and reflected the intense interest in innovation and in bringing life in its immediacy, moment-to-moment sensation, into art, while breaking the habits of perception. Although Robert Bly reflects the desires of a later generation of poets, his insight into what prose can afford as a form for poetry is relevant to the Modernists as well:

> The prose poem is for poets in English a relatively new form, but I don't believe a new form in poetry rises accidentally, or only to amuse readers. It arrives because without it some feelings or half-buried thoughts in us would remain beneath the consciousness, unsure of themselves, unable to break through. (1977: 44)

In his Prologue, Williams says something similar, and also hints that not every effort would be fruitful:

> The virtue of it all is in an opening of doors, though some rooms of course will be empty, a break with banality, the continual hardening which habit enforces. There is nothing left in me but the virtue of curiosity, Demuth puts it. The poet should be forever at the ship's prow. (May 1919: 80)

The image of these prose texts as newly opened rooms, sometimes empty, yet always 'a break with banality,' is both poignant and apt. It describes how the prose form, the vehicle of argument, exposition, logic, can also lead to the disruption of habit and the unleashing of expression in new ways, playing off what may be expected, a medium that makes possible creative detours from the expected paths of prose.

'Every context creates a paratext' (Genette, 266)

The 'context' of the poetry scene in early twentieth-century Great Britain and the United States was an ambivalent one for the prose poem coming out of a nineteenth-century French tradition and the embrace of the *fin-de-siècle*. Nonetheless, poets eager

to experiment and to find forms of expression that would help lift 'to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose', as Williams desired, produced prose texts with clear claims to poetry. The little magazines of early Modernism published such works as they welcomed experiments of all kinds. At the same time, translation of verse into prose form also supported the persistence of prose poetry, and, like *Ulysses* or *The Cantos*, titles that referenced older poetic traditions lent legitimacy. Other titles reflect a Modernist awareness of a partial or 'broken' consciousness, with the implication that to express that authentically, new forms are needed. When parageneric, titles signal a potential for the texts so named and grouped. Titles like 'blue-prints', 'silhouettes', or 'sketches' may suggest a full rethinking of representation, enacted in the dynamic between title and text. Craft itself is radicalised when titles like 'improvisations' spur new approaches to writing and creativity. Thus, although a marginal presence in early Modernism, poetry in prose offered a field for experimentation, and titling played a role in both legitimising the texts and suggesting their potential as new creative forms. Titles tipped off the reader to the presence of 'art' and provided a way into the text. They authorised reading prose as poetry.

Endnotes

1. This attack on the genre for its suspect hybridity and its subsequent disregard by many major modernist poets is something that I discuss in my book, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery*, in chapter one: 'The Prose Poem as a Decadent Genre'.
2. As Bartholomew Brinkman observes, in spite of this subtitle, *Poetry*'s 'Open Door' policy invited 'an increasing number of poetry experiments, including *vers libre*, the prose poem and polyphonic prose' (2009: 30). Brinkman finds a delinking of 'poetry' and verse form in the magazine that its 'perhaps unfortunate subtitle' undermines (2009: 33).
3. Nelsen offers a fairly comprehensive overview of the presence of the prose poem in the little magazines of Modernism. She goes on to argue a 'special affinity' between the form and the little magazines based in a shared marginality, focusing in particular on the use of the form by women to assert defiance of authoritarian tradition while giving voice to the experience of women. She also identifies a 'collage aesthetic' in these prose poems through the use of fragments, often with metapoetic significance, in sync with the visual art that also appears in some journals. It is worth noting that the designation 'prose poem' and 'poem in prose' does appear occasionally in the little magazines. For instance, Richard Aldington publishes 'A Memory: Poem in Prose' in the 1 April 1916 number of *The Egoist*; 'Prose Poems' serves to introduce his 'Thanatos' and 'Hermes-of-the-Dead' in the March 1917 issue of *The Little Review*; and four works by John Rodker are labelled 'Prose Poems' in the October 1918 *Little Review*.
4. Genette focuses primarily on books and their 'paratexts', but the notion is equally relevant to the situation of texts appearing in journals. The editors of those journals would number among the author's 'allies', to use Genette's term.
5. As Longenbach notes, *I Gather the Limbs of Osiris* appears in twelve issues of *The New Age* from 30 November 1911 to 22 February 1912 (1987: 46).
6. See, too, Hugh Kenner on the meaning of this title for Pound's historical method and translation as 'a model for the poetic act' (1971: 150).

7. The essay, of course, is another part of the paratext for the translated poem, fashioning a particular reading of it.
8. Monroe seems to have ignored Pound's advice, although in September 1915, she published an autobiographical poem by Upward, 'The Discarded Imagist', in which he claims that the *Scented Leaves* were his 'little poems' inspired by Chinese poetry. For a broader context, see Helen Carr on Monroe's global perspective and deep enthusiasm for East Asian culture (2012: 58–60).
9. Pound, however, left Upward's poems out of *The Egoist*'s May 1915 'Special Imagist Number'. It was this omission that prompted Upward to respond with a humorous poem titled 'The Discarded Imagist'. See Matthew Vaughan for a fuller account of this episode.
10. I draw here from the list provided by Genette from the classical (French seventeenth-century) tradition of using generic titles for poetry collections: '*Odes, Epigrams, Hymns, Elegies, Satires Idylls, Epistles, Fables, Poems,* and so forth'. He provides the following as examples of the *'parageneric'* which has a thematic dimension: '*Méditations, Harmonies, Recueillements, Unfashionable Observations, Divagations, Approximations, Variété, Tel quel [As Is], Pièces, Répertoire, Microlectures [Microreadings*]' (1997: 86).
11. Amy Lowell does claim a new genre in her invention of 'polyphonic prose', but she does not does not use titling to indicate generic status. Thus this example falls outside the question of how titling can give rise to or imply genre.
12. Some examples of prose poems that use 'landscape' (a genre of painting) in their titles: Richard Aldington, 'Religious Landscape' (*The Egoist,* 1 March 1916); Jessie Dismorr, 'Landscape' (*The Little Review,* August 1919); anonymous, 'Landscape' (*The Little Review,* Autumn 1922).
13. The fragment was important to Romanticism, of course, and the Romantic reconsideration of the role and forms of poetry. See, for instance, Jonathan Monroe on the similarities between Friedrich Schlegel's *Athenäums-* and *Lyceums-Fragmente* and Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris: Petits poèmes en prose.* For both writers, Monroe finds a perception that the fragmentary form reflects the fragmentary nature of modern life and poses questions about that modernity (1987: 59–62).
14. At this time, the editors are Margaret Anderson, Ezra Pound, and Jules Romains.
15. William Q Macuit finds here the strategies of a manifesto despite Williams' claim of being late to that game, that Williams 'establishes a position for himself *inside* literary tradition by claiming that his writings lie completely *outside* literary tradition' (2008: 68). Nonetheless Williams is clearly not speaking for an avant-garde group, nor offering clear prescriptions for writing a new form of poetry, in the manner of Pound's Imagiste rules.

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