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The prose poem and the comic: on Russell Edson's 'The Manual of Sleep'

Abstract:

An essay is presented which discusses comedy and prose poetry in contemporary culture. The author looks at why prose poems have a generic predisposition toward comedy and suggests that prose poetry has the ability to endlessly reinvent itself and combine elements of parables, fables, and aphorism. Reflections are provided by the author on comedy and the prose poem.

Biographical note:

Peter Johnson has a new book of prose poems, *Old Man Howling at the Moon*, forthcoming from Madhat Press. This is his fifth book. His second book of prose poems, *Miracles & Mortifications*, received the James Laughlin Award from The Academy of American Poets. It was the first book of prose poems to win that award. He is the founder and editor of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal* (which he's planning to resurrect in the fall of 2018). Past issues have been can be found at http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/prosepoem/ His fiction and prose poetry have been published in various magazines, including *TriQuarterly, Epoch, APR, Beloit Fiction Journal, Field, Boulevard, Iowa Review, Indiana Review, Colorado Review, Quarterly West, Denver Quarterly,* and *Ploughshares*. His work has received creative writing fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rhode Island Council on the Arts, along with a "Best Book of 2012" citation by *Kirkus Reviews*. More can be found about him and his work at peterjohnsonauthor.com

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Kierkegaard wrote that the 'comical is present in every stage of life, for wherever there is life there is contradiction'. Although even the biggest sourpuss might agree with this statement, anyone who has ever taught a course on comedy knows that it's still not easy to decide just what is comic. In my dissertation on black humor in the novels of John Hawkes I went to great lengths to describe the dark comedy of a scene in *The Lime Twig* where a woman is bound by a thug, appropriately named Thick, then beaten to death with a truncheon. I showed how Hawkes distances us from the event by narrating it through the point of view of the woman, who, at the moment of the beating, is considering, among other odd things, how the position she's tied in is bad for her figure.

Imagine my shock when one of my readers, a woman of course, angrily pointed out that there never was and never would be anything funny about a woman being violently murdered. Was she just a humorless feminist? Not at all. In fact, by any decent moral standards, she was right, yet wasn't she missing Hawkes's point and letting her moral qualms obscure her literary judgment?

It does seem that comedy shares the same problem as pornography. As DH Lawrence said, 'What is pornography to one man is the laughter of genius to another'. Teach Woody Allen's short fiction to a class of freshman; some will laugh so hard they'll nearly fall off their chairs, others will find him stupid and silly. Teach a few classes on the literary and artistic experiments of Dada; some will rejoice in its nihilistic hijinks, others will find them incoherent, childish, or needlessly obscure – all of which responses, ironically, would have pleased the Dadaists.

This lack of consensus on comedy was driven home to me about eight years ago when I was still editing *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*. Russell Edson had sent me a number of prose poems, and I was trying to decide which ones to accept. One of the poems was called 'The Encounter'.

> A hand was resting on the table in front of me in a sleepy fist. Suddenly it flipped on its back and opened its fingers as if asking to have its palm read.
> But as I looked into its lines it suddenly flew up and slapped me in the face.
> I began to cry …
> Then this hand, I forget which, began to wipe away my tears …

A cute poem, but certainly not one of Edson's strongest, so I placed it on the end table and began paging through his other submissions. At that moment my nine-year-old son stumbled in, grabbed the poem, and read it, whereupon he broke into an uncontrollable belly laugh. What did he see that I didn't? And his reaction was important because I was editing a journal and teaching a course on prose poetry, and the prose poem from *Paris Spleen* onward often veers toward the comic. In fact, the majority of the submissions I received were comic poems, or at least attempted to be so.

Why does the prose poem have a generic predisposition toward comedy?

Here are a few thoughts on the subject.

Kierkegaard's emphasis on contradiction is certainly important. What can be more contradictory than a poem in prose, with its oxymoronic name and paradoxical nature? Edson alludes to this inherent contradiction, comparing the prose poem to a 'cast-iron aeroplane that can actually fly'. Charles Simic notes the slapstick element in its

composition when he writes: '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'. One reason for the recent prose-poem renaissance is that the postmodern is the norm, almost a cliché. We're not surprised to see a bald, fully tattooed young woman with three nose rings walking down the street, reading the sermons of Cotton Mather, wearing a Versace blouse, cutoff jeans, and a pair of wingtips. That's the spirit of the prose poem, which is why it flourished during the periods of Dada and surrealism and during the collage experiments of the Cubists. It's only appropriate that Max Jacob shared living space with Picasso. And what better approximates the comic juxtaposition and disruption of the prose poem, not to mention its parodic inclinations, than a work like Duchamp's *The Bride*, which visually debunks one of the sacred symbols of romantic love by splintering planes and connecting shifting forms with odd pipes and tendons, forcing us to yoke two different and opposed views of the human anatomy.

Arthur Koestler calls this interpretive act 'bisociation'. He begins his discussion by referring to a joke from Freud's essay on the unconscious, a joke that reads like a prose poem:

> Chamfort tells the story of a Marquis at the court of Louis XIV who, on entering his wife's boudoir and finding her in the arms of the Bishop, walked calmly to the window and went through the motion of blessing the people in the street.
> 'What are you doing?' cried the angry wife.
> 'Monsignor is performing my functions', replied the Marquis, 'so I am performing his'.

Koestler attributes the humor of this joke to the Marquis' unexpected reaction, which overthrows our own expectations. But more important, he argues that we laugh at the joke because it contains two separate and self-consistent 'frames of reference', in this case 'codes of conduct'. The logic of one code of behavior suggests that the Marquis will be so angered that he might throw the Bishop out the window. But, simultaneously, we recognize another code, which deals with the 'division of labor, the quid pro quo, the give and take'. And this code, too, has its own logic, which makes sense to us in another context. It is the 'clash of these two mutually incompatible codes or associative contexts' can best be seen in a prose poem like Edson's 'Sleep':

> There was a man who didn't know how to sleep; nodding off every night into a drab unprofessional sleep. Sleep that he'd grown so tired of sleeping.
> He tried reading The Manual of Sleep, but it just put him to sleep. That same old sleep that he had grown so tired of sleeping …
> He needed a sleeping master, who with a whip and chair would discipline the night, and make him jump through hoops of gasolined fire. Someone who could make a tiger sit on a tiny pedestal and yawn.

We laugh at this poem because of the juxtaposition of the simple, hopefully natural act of sleeping with the stern discipline we associate with manuals and circus trainers. The comic absurdity of the poem is captured with the phrase 'sleeping master'. Yet the poem is held together by its 'logic of composition', a phrase Edson uses to describe his poems. Certainly if there is such a thing as an 'unprofessional sleep', then there must be 'The Manual of Sleep' and a 'sleeping master'. Now you might ask, 'Couldn't a verse poem

manipulate some of these same conceits?' Most certainly, yet I believe that the paradoxical nature of the prose poem, the way it so willingly embraces opposites, makes it a fertile place for such bisociation, which is why so many comic sensibilities are attracted to it.

But this process of bisociation is not a tidy act, one that can be diagrammed on a graph, accompanied by a clear resolution, as certain theorists of comedy would like us to believe. These critics often attempt to freeze the comic moment, then point to its social significance. According to this approach, 'Sleep' would be a satire on the artificial and mechanical ways humans attempt to deal with a natural problem. Edson's insomniac would be a perfect example of a person trying to encrust the mechanical onto the living – to paraphrase Henri Bergson's description of comedy. Edson himself would groan at this kind of reading, arguing that he is not interested in satire but in the 'shape of thought'. Perhaps this is what Fred Miller Robinson means when, referring to Bergson, he writes:

> What is 'encrusted' on us, the living, is our intellect, which perceived in fixed products a reality that is in constant process. The natural, the adaptable, the pliable, the creative, are not strictly social ideals, but the very life of things. So that when we discover the comic, we are not always correcting mechanical behavior, but we can be observing an aspect of human behavior that it beyond correction, that is universal.

Prose poetry, I think, privileges 'the natural, the adaptable, the pliable'. It is the wild card of literary genres, where process and possibility are more important than representation. Elsewhere I have compared the genre-blending nature of prose poem to the platypus, which is an egg-laying mammal with webbed feet, a beaver-like tail, and a duckbill. Certainly the blending of these unlike characteristics make us laugh at the platypus, just as we are amused by the way prose poems merge elements of the parable, the fable, the aphorism, the pensée and so on. But, unlike the prose poem's indeterminate generic makeup, the platypus's genetic code is predetermined. It can't all of a sudden grow an elephant's trunk out of its backside, or a rhinoceros' horn out of its forehead, then have a Venus's-flytrap sprout from the tip of the horn. If it could endlessly reinvent itself like this, then it would resemble a prose poem, and a pretty good one at that.