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The Text as Richard Serra Sculpture: On Reading the Prose Poem

American philosopher John Dewey says, "Art is the experience," and by this he means not just the making of the art - i.e. that Pollock at work on his paintings, dripping and dancing above the canvas is the "art", the end product the "artwork" - in Dewey's sensibility, however, the artwork is endowed with a certain potential energy that is released when experienced: I engage the artwork, and I have a reaction. It is the experience of the finished product that is the art, and it is the experience with art and how it affects us that makes art so important.

But let's take this one step further. The reason why innovations in art have been met, at first, with scorn, fear, or rage is because often we go to art with preconceived notions about what an artwork *should* be - these hallmarks are subconscious, and represent a mixture of cultural and personal experience, taste, and curiosity, among other factors. It is here where our aesthetic exists - and how we react to a particular artwork is as much a statement of our own expectations as it is about the work itself; perhaps more so, hence the old adage, "I don't know about art but know what I like". This statement sets up personal expectations and taste against what art critics might say.

Let's take this to the music world. Nothing upsets the fans of a particular band more to have that band release an album that sounds different. The reason: it doesn't meet the listener's expectations for what an album by this particular band *should* sound like. For the musicians, the art of challenging one's self to write new material is matched by the consumer's desire to have his/her expectations met. For many bands, changing style can be a death knell. For others, though, their audience grows with the band, expecting the eclectic or the avant garde. We hear this best when we consider a band such as Sonic Youth, who has continually grown and challenged their own sensibility without sacrificing their audience. On the other hand, I remember when the L.A. punk band X released the album *See How We Are* which was met by many in the band's core audience with derision, though the title itself announces a change: it is not titled *See How We Were*. Again, expectations and artistic vision come into conflict.

The difference, of course, is that when we go to an art museum we expect to be challenged - especially if the words "modern" or "contemporary" are in the names of the museum. When we buy a CD, we're participating in consumerism, especially in stores that are selling to a broad commercial audience. The musicians, though, can be committed to being both artists and entertainers. The audience is one of art fans and consumers, and this begs the question beyond the world of popular music: What happens when we become consumers of art?

People commission art works and have been disappointed by the final products, leading to feuds between artist and patron; closer to home, when we buy a book, for instance, does expectation shape the relationship between reader and writer?

Young writers, especially poets, enter college with a preconceived notion of what a poem or story is - often this idea is rooted in their lack of experience. They want poems loaded with abstractions, with a rhyme scheme, that conveys "emotion" in the most basic ways. Furthermore, because of experiences they've had in literature classes, they expect many poems to have a secret hidden meaning. These expectations are displayed both in the cryptic poems the majority of them initially write, and in their often negative responses to the poems we read. Whenever I ask an introductory Creative Writing class or an Intro to Poetry class, *What's a poem?* the most common response is: "It's the expression of feelings." This is, of course, both true and an oversimplification. Many times, I have students who are reluctant readers of contemporary poems: their expectations are that the poems will be boring or they won't "get" a particular poem, no matter how much assurance I give them. The reason: they expect poems to be riddles of abstractions. Lastly, because they haven't had much experience with contemporary poems, many of them have their doubts that the examples I give them are poems.

If they are reluctant readers of poems - unwilling to explicate, to push themselves into the classroom discussion - they are willing readers of prose poems. As long as I at first don't use the term "prose poem". How differently they react to the quirky prose lyricism of the form. This is often my access hatch to poetry for my students; they don't know they've entered the realm of the poem until I use the term, well after our discussion has been under way. Students, like most readers, have different expectations of prose and of poetry; therefore, when they read a prose poem, they are expecting not lyricism, image and the music of poetry. They experience these things within the form of their experience - and we talk about them in class. The students don't know they're talking poetry because the poetry they're discussing is outside their expectations. As poet Michael Benedikt notes,

The prose poem, which avoids by degree (but not by kind) various strictly formal devices of rhymed verse, and which emphasizes an approach more naturally consistent with the inward or 'associated' turnings of the human psyche . . . seems an ideal vehicle for . . . sophisticated, psychologically realistic, esthetic aspirations. (quoted in Stone)

And it's this natural consistency that enables the prose poem to inform and entertain students.

It is this very duality of the prose poem that makes it great in the classroom, and terrible in the greater literary world. As Charles Simic pointed out,

The prose poem is . . . the monster child of two incompatible strategies, the lyric and the narrative. On the one hand, there's the lyric's wish to make time stop around an image, and on the other hand, one wants to tell a little story. (quoted in Zawacki)

Like any monster child, there are some who love it, and some who want to lock it away or send it into exile. There are many poets who disregard the prose poem as form - seeing the name itself as a language game - you *can't* have a poem in prose, they grumble; the very nature of poems is lineation. Many of these complainers are writers of free verse poems who complained vigorously

when new formalists declared that free verse wasn't real poetry - that poetry was rhymed and metered and used traditional forms.

And again we scrape ourselves against expectations. In his discussion of Joy Harjo's prose poems, critic Robert Johnson mentions that "simply by seeing a poem a reader is tempted to accept its form as indicative of meaning and to expect the poem to perform (and be performed) as others of its general class." Just as many formalist poems railed against free verse, many poets still bristle at the idea of a prose poem because its shape belies how it functions. However, its very form enables it to have great power as the experience of my students shows. Furthermore, the form's momentum toward the literary mainstream, implies that critical readers (if not critics themselves) understand and sense the form's power. By knowing what to expect of the prose poem, one may enjoy the form's unique qualities. And the expectation goes against the expectation of the word *poem* itself.

I'm thinking, now, of Richard Serra's recent sculptures: Bellamy and Sylvester. The works are huge "corridors" of curving metal - sometimes the walls are concave, sometimes convex, and the viewer becomes a participant as he/she can walk through the sculptures. Serra has said that "the subject of the sculpture[s] is the viewer's experience walking through and around it" (quoted in Tomkins 52). The same may be true of the best prose poems - the subject is as much the surprise and duality the reader experiences in the work as it is the "meaning" of the text itself. Serra's sculptures change our relationship with sculpture - who hasn't wanted to touch the work in a gallery, have a tactile experience of it. But our experience always is that we aren't allowed. Serra, however, turns our expectation of sculpture on its head, just as he has done in regards to the steel his sculptures are made from. The swoops, curves and buoyancy of Serra's work transforms its elemental material. Ditto, in the hands of premier craftspersons, the prose poem transforms both the medium of prose and the medium of poetry into something new; the sentences swoop, curve and float in unexpected and unique ways that make Peter Johnson, poet and editor of *The Prose Poem: an International Journal*, say that he "must look at each [prose] poem as if it *is* its own genre" (Johnson 16).

The history of the prose poem shows us that it was wrought, deliberately, into this schism between elitist language of poetry and the more urbane realm of prose. Baudelaire's prose poems were as much a political form, a statement about the nature of the arts in nineteenth century France, as they were a literary statement. They were outside of the experience of the readers and thus truly revolutionary. What's amazing today, as the short prose form proliferates into sudden fictions, flash fictions, performance texts, short-shorts, micro-fictions, etc, is that the surprising original hybrid, the prose poem, is both highly in vogue and still pushed aside by many in the American poetic mainstream. Stephen Dunn subtitles his 1998 collection *Riffs & Reciprocities*: prose pairs, not poems. He refers to the pieces as paragraphs. Yet these pieces' mixture of lyricism, imagism, meditation and narrative are all hallmarks of the prose poem tradition.

While many refuse to embrace the prose poem in name, others engage the prose poem with enthusiasm; Maurice Kilwein Guevara, author of two collections of poetry before releasing *Autobiography of So-and-so: Poems in Prose* in 2001, says about the prose poem: "The prose poem maintains a seemingly traditional narrative approach, but it is sometimes ruptured by the irrational or surreal which gives the piece an *uhh* which wouldn't happen [if it weren't working in both poetic and prose traditions]" (private correspondence with the author). It's this rupture of the irrational, captured in the very term *prose poem*, that is the source of energy in the prose poem. And it's this energy that is making the prose

poem a more mainstream form. Since Simic won the Pulitzer for *The World Doesn't End* in 1990, books of prose poems have won major awards including the James Laughlin Award of the Academy of American Poets, and the Mammoth Books Prize; the Marie Alexander Prize was established for collections of prose poems first at New Rivers Press and now with White Pine Press; a slew of mixed genre poetry and prose poetry books have been released by diverse writers such as Mary Oliver, Campbell McGrath, and Sean Thomas Dougherty; and a number of new anthologies of short-short prose pieces have been recently published.

The dismay at the term *prose poem* which some in the literary mainstream and many outside of it feel, is part of the power of the prose poem itself - the duality, the seeming irrationality - of the term is at the heart of the form's power. It exists in two worlds. It is of two minds. And although this is true of the best of poems, the form of the prose poem, its traditional prose look, is camouflage for its subversive nature. It subverts the world of the readers of both poetry and prose. It subverts the rules of the rational world - the mainstream world - with its seemingly familiar form that is invaded by the irrational, the surreal, the magically real, the absurd, the imagistic, the truly symbolic. The prose blocks are wrought like the steel sheets of a Serra sculpture so the sentences twist and curve and cause us to have an experience through which the world and how we understand it has been, if only momentarily, transformed.

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