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The Prose Poem:
A Short History, a Brief Reflection and a Dose of the Real Thing

Part One: What is a poem?

The prose poem arrived as a new self-proclaimed literary form in France, through Charles Baudelaire with his 1861 collection, *Petits poèmes en prose*. In a preface to one of these small poems he acknowledged Aloysius Bertrand's *Gaspard de la Nuit* (1842) as his model. The next generation of French poets, including Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Lautréamont, took up this new form in a spirit of revolt and freedom from the constraining traditions of French verse. Richard Terdiman has written that 'at just the historical moment when the term "'prosaic" was mutating into a pejorative, the prose poem sought to reevaluate the expressive possibilities, and the social functionality, of prose itself' (Terdiman 261).

From this inspirational base, French poets have repeatedly taken up the prose poem as a form worth exploring. 'Today in France, a poem is as likely to be written in prose as in verse,' Marguerite Murphy has observed in her study of prose poems in English.

While the subversive French poetic form of *vers libre* was taken up by English writers in the modernist era to the point where free verse now dominates poetry written in English, there has been no comparable interest in the prose poem among English-speaking writers. Why is this?

In the Decadent and Symbolist atmosphere of the nineteenth century *fin de siècle* when all things French were of interest in sophisticated circles, some English writers did take up this new French form. In 1890 the first French anthology of prose poems, *Pastels in Prose*, was translated into English. Oscar Wilde's own *Poems in Prose* was published in 1894. This was a suite of six prose poems, mostly composed in an ironic and decorative biblical style replete with anaphora and the artificiality of thee's, thy's and thou's. Each poem was a small portrait contained in a narrative which obliquely offered a philosophical observation. Some critics claim that the prose poem fell from use because it became tainted through its association with the French posturing and effeminate sexuality of the British Decadent movement at a time of increasingly conservative British nationalism. Others have suggested that Anglo-American writers generally did not distinguish between free verse and prose poems. For many English language poets free verse made room enough for the prosaic in poetry (which was Wordsworth's great project), and at the same time drew prose closer to the poetic. Another suggestion has been that the prose poem might have been important in France where there was a more strict tradition of forms to rebel against. Anglo-American poetry was always less dominated and less restricted by rigid adherence to forms. This view would have it that the kind of revolution represented by the prose poem was not needed or desired in literature written in English. A further reason for the prose poem's relative neglect might be that at this time no distinctively original prose poem was produced in English

which might have demonstrated the potential of the form and might have inspired further work.

When T.S. Eliot wrote a preface to the publication of his translation of a French prose poem, *Anabasis*, by St John Perse, it was both an apologia for the form and a brief set of instructions on how to read it. First of all he argued that

> any obscurity of the poem, on first readings, is due to the suppression of "links in the chain" of explanatory and connecting matter, and not to incoherence, or to the love of cryptogram. The justification of such abbreviation of method is that the sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression... (Eliot 1975: 77)

Then for the benefit of bemused readers Eliot confessed,

> I was not convinced of Mr Perse's imaginative order until I had read the poem five or six times. And if, as I suggest, such an arrangement of imagery requires just as much fundamental brainwork as the arrangement of an argument, it is to be expected that the reader of a prose poem should take at least as much trouble as a barrister reading an important decision on a complicated case... (Eliot 1975: 78)

This endorsement comes close to reading like a doctor's instructions attached to a nasty prescription.

Eliot published only one prose poem, titled 'Hysteria' (1915) (Eliot 1968: 34). It is a short paragraph of four sentences describing a woman's laughter and ending with an appreciation of her shaking breasts. It is whimsical, surreal, given a modern edge by its psychiatric title, and suggests the observer is becoming infected by the woman's disease of laughing.

Other writers in English who have produced notable extended prose poems of book length are William Carlos Williams (*Kora in Hell* 1920), Gertrude Stein (*Tender Buttons* 1914), John Ashbery (*Three Poems* 1972) and Russell Edson (*The Intuitive Jolurney and Other Works* 1976). There are some anthologies, among them the Canadian and North American collections, *The Lyric Paragraph* (1987) and *The Party Train* (1996), featuring work by Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, Leonard Cohen, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Donald Hall, Robert Haas and many others. These collections attest to a continuing vitality for the form among English speaking writers, but one that is confined to anthologies because these writers rarely tackle whole books of prose poetry. For most poets in English it seems to be an occasional form. It is symptomatic of the lack of anthologies that the sub-titles of these two books announce themselves as national collections: *A Collection of Canadian Prose Poems* and *A Collection of North American Prose Poetry*. In his introduction to *The Lyric Paragraph* Robert Allen notes that, traditionally, the prose poem has not played a large part in Canadian literature, and that this collection is the first of its kind in Canada. In a publisher's preface to *Party Train* (edited by Robert Alexander, Mark Vinz and C.W. Truesdale), C.W. Truesdale wonders at the critical neglect of prose poetry, and in the editor's introduction Robert Alexander points to the way prose poetry can facilitate a kind of 'flow' that lineation interrupts. It might, he muses, be the perfect vehicle for the expression of a truly American poetic voice.

Robert Allen addresses the question of the distinctive qualities of the prose poem and makes the claim that the rhythms of prose can be as intricate and rich as those of poetry, and that perhaps there is no separation of genres, only writing through a continuum of merging forms. This might be a truism, given the understandings of text and language suggested by writers like Derrida and Wittgenstein, who have based their inquiries on the fact that philosophers and theorists are, after all, writers along with all other writers.

Their task is to get the writing right - to listen to language as it speaks through their pens (keyboards) - the same task faced by poets and prose fiction writers. Or it might be a liberating insight, one that gives us writers permission, as it were, to broaden or deepen our appreciation of 'the poetic'. Taken to its extreme, though, this suggestion does away with the hedge-building that a collection of prose poems is intended to generate. Allen goes on in his introduction to outline what the prose poem can do: it can generate a hypnotic quality through sacrificing the discontinuites of line-break and caesura; it can suggest the essay as it turns easily to reflective modes; it can work towards the sort of narrative expectations that prose sets up but convey these with the compactness of poetic strategies through its own music and lyric power. These final observations recall Eliot's claim for prose poetry - that it is a difficult but rewarding form if the attentive reader persists.

It is perhaps impossible to discuss the prose poem sensibly. If you move too far towards categorising the different forms it can take, you can end by defeating its defiant formlessness; and if you move down the path of pointing out its poetic strategies you re-align it with that form of poetry it is deliberately discarding. I have tried teaching the prose poem as a possible creative form both in a short fiction class and in a poetry class, both times with Russell Edson's work as a starting point. In neither class have students taken to the prose poem willingly when I have given them freedom to choose their mode of writing. This might be due to my own inability to do much more than give them examples of prose poems and hope they become as fired-up by these strange creatures of the imagination as I have been. It strikes me that the way in to writing prose poems might be to structure them as short prose exercises at first (e.g. a paragraph of sentences that contradict each previous sentence; an abstract description of an abstract painting; a paragraph in the first person voice without the word 'I') and then to let doodling take over as the starting-point. Perhaps they are best written in the metaphoric dark.

One consequence of the relative neglect of the prose poem in English is its lasting presence as a subversive and alternative poetic tradition: a permanent shadow thrown by the dominance of free verse; a niggling outsider; an exotic and possibly decadent third way somewhere between prose and poetry. Terdiman has called the prose poem a counter-discourse, inescapably anticanonical. The contemporary American surrealist-inspired poets Charles Simic and James Tate have both taken up the form and written small, ironic essays on it. Charles Simic suggests:

> 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 while in hot pursuit. The prose poem is a burst of language following a collision with a large piece of furniture. (Simic 7)

He confesses he writes prose poems in order to get away from himself, 'to embark on an adventure of unforeseeable consequences'. Writing in the same year, 1996, James Tate calls the prose poem a deceptively simple package (Tate 158). The package is that old unthreatening friend of the reader, the paragraph. Inside the paragraph, however, the reader can encounter all the tricks of poetry but one: the line break. And with luck, at the end, the reader will be pulled out of the poem with a small epiphany. These two essays have in themselves the poise and eccentricity of prose poems, for they are working-notes by writers sharpening some incisive part of the mind not easily identified, and mostly used with the eyes closed.

The prose poem, so often a brief and brilliant aphoristic flare in the general darkness around us, is perhaps the philosopher's poetic form. Nietzsche and Wittgenstein wrote whole series of prose poems, it seems to me. And what the prose poem does is ask, over and over, what are the rules of this verbal game we call poetry. How far outside the apparent rules can we stand and still be in the game? Whose rules are they? Whose

rules were they? Where are the rules? What rules can apply when the ineffable is the aim? In Auden's words, perhaps with this the prose poem, we must leap before we look.

Against its existence as an enigmatic shadow-genre or an anti-genre, the prose poem, as Robert Alexander would have it, possibly brings poetry back to the vernacular, closer to a democratic or populist language - for isn't prose the vehicle of conversation, of plain talk? Repeated movements in the arts towards relevance or contemporary modernity have insisted on the importance of natural speech as the best model for a living literature. Bakhtin identified the many non-literary facets of prose as the great asset of the novel. The novel renews itself relentlessly by adopting all the voices of prose on offer. The prose poem, in this light, announces itself as allied to a natural, contemporary mode of language. But perhaps it rather works to highlight the stylised structures and conventions embedded even in prose. Perhaps it makes the point that prose is itself artificial enough to carry the work of poetry?

Prose poetry is not quite a poet's prose and not quite a prose writer's poetry. Recently at a postgraduate creative writing seminar, a prose fiction writer announced she was in fact a prose poet because she preferred the poetic mode of writing but did not have time to learn how to break her work into lines. This suggests the prose poem not only gives the poet a way to break the mould, but it gives the prose writer a way to move strangely out of the territory of prose, while still writing prose.

So how do you know when you're in the presence of a prose poem? Or when you're writing one? Here, with this problem, the relatively new genre of the prose poem resurrects authorial intention as a key to reading. We can know something is a prose poem because it appears in a book of prose poems or an anthology of prose poems (though none have been published in Australia) or is simply titled prose poem, as Baudelaire's were in 1861. To say this though does not say enough, for immediately both writer and reader seek something else, something essentially (and elusively) poetic in the writing itself.

What does it feel like then to be writing a prose poem? The prose poem, I would argue, for the writer, must be an intellectual form of writing because it constantly problematises its nature, threatening to be one thing and refusing to be another. The poet-prosewright must constantly assess and re-assess the assumptions that create a voice and a mode of progress. Crudely, in prose we could say it is narrative, argument or character that drive the writing forward, while in poetry it is the triple spiralling of self-conscious form, the sensual rhythmic presence of words, and linguistic sparks of association that hold the writing together. Alternatively we could say that in prose the sentence drives the writing on, while in poetry it is the line that builds the writing. In these schemes prose poetry becomes an always imminent collision.

When I find myself inside a prose poem, I find that there there is, as in prose, narratives, even possible novels - but the narrative is never the point. It is a force more or less present. I find there is an exchange or conversation between imagery and narrative; and for me there is a fragmentary construction. It is made by building paragraphs one against another, just as other forms of poetry might be made by building lines further and further down into the life of the poem. Perhaps this sense of being built as it goes is at the core of the meaning we put on the word 'poetic'. Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* builds its way to its shape through a strict method (44 sections with 44 sentences in each section to match her 44 years) until the whole hovers somewhere between autobiography, fiction, memoir and oddly-structured poetry. It moves by feel. That is how it is when I am inside a prose poem looking for a way out.

Part Two: Why I am a Poet

Is it true you cannot become a writer unless something has gone wrong early in your life - and that this experience will repeat itself as a murmur below everything you write from then on?

Winter sharpened its teeth on the tips of our fingers, toes and ears in those days. My breath steamed out of me. Puddles cracked under my school shoes. Everything was a miracle. Early each morning a horse dawdled down Sydney Road pulling a tray of milk crates while a man as hot as his horse ran bottles to the front doorsteps. I would climb on the tray and let the horse take me up to the church a mile and a half away. At the church of Saint Paul I would push open the heavy side door to the sacristy where I would put on the white alb of an altar boy. Father Norris was there kissing his stole before flipping it over his neck, tying the girdle round himself like a mountaineer, muttering the Latin prayers needed to make him worthy of the chasuble as it dropped over his shoulders and fell with a grace that suddenly erased the old man. In his place was a priest with power to turn wine into blood and wafers of bread into flesh. I took the finger towel and glass cruets of water and wine to the credence table at the right of the altar and put out the bell on the step where I would be kneeling at the consecration. Later during the Mass I would ring it just as the chalice lifted by the priest reached its peak where, I thought, the miracle was happening. Like a magician's apprentice it was my task to keep the audience enthralled and distracted while the real magic happened beyond their perception. People stood as we marched out onto the altar. All the noises of a church, the dull beat of a dropped book, chinking beads, the stuffy sighs of winter coats, the cracks and yelps of old wooden benches, and the priest's *Introibo ad altare Dei* to which I answered *Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam*. I go to to the altar of God: to God, the joy of my youth. Father Norris had sat me on his verandah once a week and drilled me in the Latin responses. The mass was to go without a prompt or a hitch. In my slippers I made no unnecessary noise. When he spoke I was to have the Latin response on the tip of my tongue; when he put out his hand for a towel or a cruet I was to be there with it. We were a team. I was as close to Heaven as a boy could get and would know what to do when I did get there.

What is a poet? One who answers back?

Are writers the ones who refuse to give up their childish ways?

Arriving at the church for a benediction I hear shouts from the altar. A woman is on her hands and knees, wailing. She cannot speak English. Father Norris stands over her, black in his street robe, shouting at her that she has no right to go near the tabernacle because she is a woman. She backs away from the altar on her hands and knees and keeps moving backwards close to the floor until she is outside the church. Father Norris keeps shouting what a sinful act she has committed, what a sin it is for a woman to be on the altar. I prepare myself for the duties of an altar boy.

My eight-year-old son reads to me at night. When he comes to the sentence, 'The ship lost its rudder in a gale,' he reads, 'The ship lost its udder in a glade.' Later he asks me to repeat his mistake. It is important to get the mistake right.

Two men walk along a country road bending their heads towards each other and from where I stand several days away it is difficult to know whether they are sharing troubles or carrying shovels.

Like night mice moving unseen along the gutters of a city, words can keep an inhuman order below the city's neon instructions.

What went wrong? I read dead writers. I believed you had to be dead to be a writer. I went from Classic Comics to classics. I wanted to be a writer, one of the living dead.

My books by dead writers filled the Brownbuilt metal shelves installed in my mother's ironing room. Smells of washed clothes, singed cotton and dusty books filled my head with desire for the writing death: Edgar Rice Burroughs, Algernon Blackwood, H.. Wells, G.K. Chesterton, O. Henry, Captain W.E. Johns, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Kafka. The mice in my city.

My older sister did the living. Boys dreamed about her and feared her and came to me and asked me to pass on notes to her. I understood the passion in words, the importance of a sentence on a scrap of paper. I understood what could be bought with words, the coins of the heart. My sister had no time for books, not the kind of time I had. She had a face and a figure and a body. She had skin. Hair and sunglasses in summer. I had the dead and their words that probably wouldn't buy love but might be kaleidoscopes. I had words so interior I could not speak them. When my family looked at me they thought, 'When will it stop?'

Each line of poetry must be a tightrope crossed.

Winter sharpened its teeth on the tips of my fingers, toes and ears. My breath steamed out of me. Puddles cracked under my school shoes. Early each morning as I waited for a tram to take me and a few other chiuldren to school we threw stones at the rats skipping across the council rubbish tip. Grey rats on grey mounds against a grey sky. Our noses pink and wild, our eyes small and black in the low morning light. The rats dodged away like dreams from daylight. I spend my life now coaxing them back.

I regurgitated a length of paper. Pulling it from my mouth, it came up as a long worm-like length of clotted paper, on and on, unrolling from within me as it came up through my neck in a reverse-swallow. Like a tapeworm or a tumor the paper had grown inside me and eventually I had no choice but to 'bring it up'.

Drugged with fiction and poetry, dead in the endless life of words, it was not easy to know what to do with my life. I thought that if I could write one book in my lifetime that would be enough. There is a secret universe called Bookish.

Bookish: adjective: origin mid-sixteenth century: addicted to reading books or getting knowledge only from books.

The book is a hallucinatory drug, its words venomous mushrooms sprouting in dark armies on the soft fibres of paper. Like all addicts, I savoured rituals: the purchase of a new hardback classic, holding it in the hand, putting it aside for later, then opening it under a bright light with a heavy blanket and a soft pillow on an endless afternoon. Time let go and sat there beside me with its head in its hands.

With my brothers and sisters we strung a rope across the backyard over the concrete, and holding a broom as a steadying bar we staggered like babies into our small circus where death loomed a foot below us.

Lumping a blue vinyl schoolbag full of books, I stopped to watch a fist fight near the railway station. The crack of a fist on a face was like the sound of a textbook shutting. The eye of one man fell out onto his cheek when he was hit. I took my bag and moved away, taking with me the image of that man on the ground.

At eighteen I opened my eyes one morning in a Jesuit seminary. I had become a novice in a black robe with black wings to hold in my hands when I did not have a book. The black robe made me seem a word among other words. I was part of a story. I was training to be the most bookish of priests, fed and educated, encouraged to read and given time to write. I remember sitting in the garden of the seminary where an autumn wind turned over leaf after leaf as if looking for what had been lost.

I was close enough to priests to smell the altar wine on their breath. Books with earnest silent words opened of their own accord on my lap. Everything echoed as though spoken in a chapel. My monthly job was to clean the gully-trap at the back of the kitchen. This place where rats would drown, anchored me. Just as death must anchor every poem.

It was 1968 and I was not called up to be a soldier for the new war in Asia, for I was called by a darker government. Silent for whole days, we were amazed at how loose with sound the simple birds were. We prayed our silence would provoke God to speak to us. It was 1968 and we stood in a room watching television images of two men dressed like wingless angels bounce across the moon.

Suddenly I needed glasses. God was not enough for me. Prayers were too repetitive. I joined the rats dodging down the line of a wall in the chapel, aiming for that flaw in the brickwork and slipping like a heresy through each sacred layer of the institution.

Priests, like the most sophisticated toys, or like books, speak the same words each day. As if the great universe is silent only because it listens for these words. Who else will say them? In his black robes a priest is a a cartoon of the night walking through the day.

Some writers drag the words after them and watch a trail of wonders form from the mess of a backward-lived life. Some will nail the words down.

What went wrong was that the woman backing out of the church on her hands and knees is still moaning something in another language.

What went wrong was that my sister died, her future suddenly locked in a coffin.

Words line up like an orderly history of everything. To speak is to eat time.

A woman tells me that she dreamed she was being forced to catch rats and roast them. *Then*, she said, *you ate them for me*.

Letters black as priests press themselves against pages stripped from trees. I order and re-order the words to find the patterns that recall a miracle.

Where is my sister, the tightrope-walker? Where is the tightrope? What did we imagine would happen to us?

I was blessed with the catastrophe of words.

To be a poet something must have gone wrong very early in your life. Once there was a tightrope-walker who fell silent. Everyone who watched this happen wondered what he was thinking as he fell like God's first angel at their feet. When they looked down at the place he had fallen to they could see their own futures scattered across the sawdust like so many minor constellations, a vision of static.

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Notes and Debate

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