

The Prose Poem

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The prose poem in English is curiously ignored or distrusted, on the one hand, and yet practised by a wide range of significant poets, on the other. Those who ignore or distrust it often do so because of a conviction – or prejudice – that poetry can only be poetry when it's in verse, or if you dislike that term, when it's written in lines. Alternatively, they identify the prose poem as a peculiarly French form of poetic writing.

The second point is the easiest to answer. It is certainly true that there are an extraordinary number of important French language poets who have written poetry in prose. It's impossible to miss the fact that there is a rich and varied tradition (if indeed we can speak of it as a single tradition), from Baudelaire and Rimbaud through Michaux and Ponge to Jabès and Laporte. The attitude amongst English poets and poetry readers to modern French poetry in general seems to be that it's okay for *the French* to write that way, but we're English! However, as far as prose poetry in English is concerned, there are important examples from Thomas De Quincey onwards, with antecedents in Traherne and Donne as well as the translators of the Bible. Contemporary practitioners include Roy Fisher, Lee Harwood, Christopher Middleton, Thomas A. Clark, Paul Buck, Alan Halsey and John Burnside, as well as the late Peter Redgrove and Ken Smith. Amongst American poets, one could name John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Fanny Howe, Michael Heller, Lyn Hejinian, Sheila E. Murphy and Killarney Clary, as well as many others. Some years ago, Rupert Loydell and I compiled an anthology, *A Curious Architecture*, to show some of the diversity of prose poetry by writers in English.

Michael Benedikt addressed the other point many years ago, in his important book *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology*. The prose poem, he says, is “characterised by the intense use of virtually all the devices of poetry, which includes the intense use of devices of verse. The sole exception to the possibilities... of verse is, we should say, the line break.” Another writer, Stephen Fredman, has written of poetry in prose as involving “a prosody of syntax in sentences rather than a metrical prosody in lines” (*Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*). (I should mention that some critics and poets prefer the terms “poetry in prose” or “poet's prose”, as they feel that “the prose poem” has become identified with lyric poetry in prose rather than either a wider range or else more “experimental” work.) At any rate, we can state that rhythm is one of the elements of the prose poem, together with the sound, range and “texture” of the language. We should also specify such possibilities as metaphor, simile, image, symbol and so forth, as well as the structure of the text. It is also comparatively easy for the prose poem to move towards other forms of prose writing, such as the story or the diary or the essay.

Two examples will have to suffice. Let me begin by quoting an excerpt from the late Robert Lax's extended prose poem, *21 pages* (a meditation on the theme of searching for an elusive Other):

“Back to the streets, the parks, the quays. Back to standing and looking, watching, not watching the passers-by. Looking for a face. A face in the crowd. A particular one that I'd recognise and in a particular way. Did I think I'd find it? Did I know I'd find it? I knew I was engaged in just one thing: in looking. Looking and looking.

“And back to nights of looking, outward and in; not knowing which way I’m looking, but waiting and looking. Back to the night-watch. Day-watch and night-watch. Dusk to dawn, dawn to dusk. Mid-day to midnight. I don’t say I didn’t tire: I did. I tired, but I didn’t give up.”

We might put alongside this an excerpt from another extended prose poem, Rosmarie Waldrop’s *Lawn of Excluded Middle*. Waldrop’s prose poetry is also strongly reflective, yet more explicitly “experimental” and the language more complex than Lax’s:

“Words too can be wrung from us like a cry from that space which doesn’t seem to be the body nor a metaphor curving into perspective. Rather the thickness silence gains when pressed. The ghosts of grammar veer toward shape while my hopes still lie embedded in a quiet myopia from which they don’t want to arise. The mistake is to look for explanations where we should just watch the slow fuse burning. Nerve of confession. What we let go we let go.”

Waldrop is justly celebrated as a poet and translator, as well as the publisher (with her husband, the poet and translator Keith Waldrop) of Burning Deck Press. She has mentioned Edmond Jabès’ example as focusing her own “contradictory impulses toward flow and fragmentation.” As she says: “I tend to think [the fragment] is our way of apprehending anything. Our inclusive views are mosaics. And the shards catch light on the cut, the edges give off sparks.”

References:

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See also:

David Miller, ‘Robert Lax’s *21 pages*’, in: David Miller and Nicholas Zurbrugg (eds.), *The ABCs of Robert Lax*, Stride Publications, 1999.

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