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CHAPTER 1

Introducing the Prose Poem

PROSE POETRY'S "PROBLEM" OF DEFINITION

The prose poem in English is now established as an important literary form in many countries at a time when the composition and publication of poetry is thriving. While prose poetry is still written and published less often than lineated poetry, notable books of prose poems have been produced—including Mark Strand's acclaimed volume, *The Monument* (1978);¹ Charles Simic's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The World Doesn't End* (1989); Luke Kennard's *The Solex Brothers* (2005), winner of an Eric Gregory Award; Claudia Rankine's multi-award-winning, hybrid work, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014); and Eve Joseph's *Quarrels* (2018), winner of the Griffin Prize.

Such books demonstrate prose poetry's capacity to articulate poetic ideas in ways that are conspicuously different from contemporary lineated lyric poetry*—now usually defined as short, sometimes musical forms of poetry that appear to address personal emotions and feelings, often using the first-person voice. However, while poetry generally continues to be recognized as a literary genre highly suited to expressing intense emotion, grappling with the ineffable and the intimate, and while lineated lyric poetry is widely admired for its rhythms and musicality, the main scholarship written about English-language prose poetry to date defines the form as problematic, paradoxical, ambiguous, unresolved, or contradictory. This is despite the fact that a prose poem rarely looks unapproachable, unfinished, or confused. In some instances, the prose poem has even been portrayed as little more than illusory or nonsensical, as in this quotation from poet George Barker:

Like the Loch Ness monster the prose poem is a creature of whose existence we have only very uncertain evidence. Sometimes it seems to appear, like a series of undulating coils, out of the dithyrambs of Walt Whitman; several French critics claim to have taken photographs of this extraordinary beast, and a great many American poets possess tape recordings of the rhapsodies it chants up from the depths of the liberated imagination.²

*We are using the term "lineated lyric poetry" as opposed to "lyric poetry" to acknowledge that there are also lyric prose poems.

The common observation that the term “prose poetry” appears to contain a contradiction is not surprising given that poetry and prose are often understood to be fundamentally different kinds of writing. Prose poetry has also been described as “a poem written in prose instead of verse,” characterized as a form that “avails itself of the elements of prose . . . while foregrounding the devices of poetry,” defined in relation to flash fiction and microfiction, and compared to free verse.³ In the first issue of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, the editor and prose poet Peter Johnson states, “Just as black humor straddles the fine line between comedy and tragedy, so the prose poem plants one foot in prose, the other in poetry, both heels resting precariously on banana peels.”⁴

Johnson’s analogy is entertaining and instructive, but the prose poem looks robust rather than precarious and, despite critics’ vacillations, its literary currency is increasing to the extent that a number of new prose poetry anthologies and critical books about prose poetry have been published in recent years, or are in preparation. These include the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (2020), edited by Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington; the anthologies *The Valley Press Anthology of Prose Poetry* (2019), edited by Anne Caldwell and Oz Hardwick; *A Cast-Iron Aeroplane that Can Actually Fly: Commentaries from 80 Contemporary American Poets on Their Prose Poetry* (2019), edited by Peter Johnson; and *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem: From Baudelaire to Anne Carson* (2018), edited by Jeremy Noel-Tod. They also include the essay collections *The Edinburgh Companion to the Prose Poem* (forthcoming), edited by Mary Ann Caws and Michel Deleville, and *British Prose Poems: The Poems Without Lines* (2018), edited by Jane Monson, also editor of the 2011 anthology *This Line Is Not For Turning: An Anthology of Contemporary British Prose Poetry*; and, in Australia, a number of small anthologies of prose poetry—including *Tract: Prose Poems* (2017), *Cities: Ten Poets, Ten Cities* (2017), *Pulse: Prose Poems* (2016), and *Seam: Prose Poems* (2015) (various editors)—linked to the International Prose Poetry Group started in 2014 by the International Poetry Studies Institute at the University of Canberra.⁵ In this book we will discuss a variety of contemporary prose poems, including some from recent anthologies, because it is instructive to examine diverse examples of the form and we are interested in the way prose poetry continues to develop at a rapid pace.⁶

Prose poetry is flourishing for a variety of reasons, one of them being the late twentieth- and twenty-first-century embrace of apparently hybrid or new literary forms. Apart from the prose poem, there are many other examples, including the lyric essay, novels that largely eschew narrative, fictocritical works, poetic memoir, and epistolary works written as poetry. There are also works that demonstrate a multivalent hybridity, such as graphic novels, which include prose poems. We explore the hybrid nature of some prose poems in more detail in later chapters but, generally speaking, the prose poem is one of a number of kinds of literature that appear to possess the characteristics, or use the techniques, of

more than one established genre or form. Many of the significant scholars of prose poetry emphasize this point, including Robert Alexander, Michel Delville, Stephen Fredman, Jonathan Monroe, Steven Monte, Margueritte S. Murphy, and Nikki Santilli.⁷

As some of these critics have acknowledged, the apparently thorny issue about how to define the terms “poetry,” “prose,” and “prose poetry” may be due partly to the confusion in many people’s minds between poetry and verse. Santilli notes how in the twentieth century, Roman Jakobson “is able to shift discussion away from a verse/prose dialectic to a more liberal concept of ‘poetry’ that may inhabit verse and nonversified work alike.”⁸ Emmylou Grosser also comments on this distinction with respect to the Hebrew Bible, observing that “the ancient Hebrew poetic texts have been passed down to us in mostly unlineated form.”⁹ She states, “For those who view poetry as . . . identifiable by the concentration of certain poetic features (most of which can also be found in prose), prose and poetry in the Bible are best viewed as the opposing ends of a continuum . . . [while] prose and verse are best viewed as distinct categories.”¹⁰ Such comments provide, in analogical form, a summary of some key features of the contemporary debate about prose poetry.

Disagreement about how to understand the term “poetry” is not new. Władysław Tatarkiewicz discusses contention among the ancient Greeks about this matter, noting that Aristotle questioned whether there was an “expression in the Greek tongue to signify poetry proper.”¹¹ Contemporary debates about how to interpret the term “poetry” are sometimes even more vexed than those of the ancient world. Some people understand “poetry” to mean condensed, highly suggestive, and often imagistic writing composed of lines that do not run to the page’s right-hand margin or, if they speak of “verse,” they usually invoke the notion that verse is identifiable by such characteristics as meter and rhyme or other aspects of verse’s formal patterning of language. When people talk of “prose,” they frequently mean something like narrative prose fiction.

Such issues demonstrate how questions of literary genre and form remain slippery and continue to generate much discussion and debate. The early difficulty in categorizing Charles Simic’s volume *The World Doesn’t End* (1989) provides an example of such slipperiness in practice. The book’s success in winning the Pulitzer Prize for poetry helped to legitimate prose poetry as a form but, reportedly, Simic did not write his works with the prose poem form specifically in mind. It was his editor who negotiated with him in order to make the book more marketable:

I showed [my manuscript] to my editor, who, to my surprise, offered to publish it. Oddly, it was only then that the question of what to call these little pieces came up. “Don’t call them anything,” I told my editor. “You have to call them *something*,” she explained to me, “so that the bookstore knows under what heading to shelve the book.” After giving it some thought, and with some uneasiness on my part, we decided to call them prose poems.¹²

Despite such ambiguities, it is unsatisfactory to define a significant literary form such as the prose poem primarily in terms of writers' or critics' uncertainties. As a significant part of contemporary literature in English, prose poetry deserves a clear, positive characterization of its features and qualities just as, for example, the lineated lyric poem or the novel does. This is especially important because the idea of poetic prose more generally is well established and has a history nearly as old as literature itself. The prose poem may be, in comparison, a new form, but its antecedents are venerable, and the idea that poetry may be written in prose is not anywhere near as radical as some writers suggest.

The Poetry Foundation states that “[t]he definition of a genre changes over time, and a text often interacts with multiple genres,”¹³ which is certainly the case with prose poetry. The Foundation also contends, in the case of genres, and at the broadest level, that the primary candidates are poetry, drama, nonfiction, and fiction. This is a good, straightforward definition and, making use of it, one may understand prose poetry as a separate, identifiable, and distinctive literary form—part of the broad genre of poetry written in the mode of prose. Lewis Turco explores this point:

[In] the Western *Judeo-Christian tradition* there is ample precedent for writing any of the *genres*—*song*, *narrative poetry*, and *dramatic poetry*, in either of the *modes*—*prose* or *verse*; therefore, genres do not depend on the modes in which they are written. “Verse,” a mode, is not equivalent to “poetry,” a genre. To ask the question “What is the difference between prose and poetry?” is to compare anchors with bullets.¹⁴

Santilli similarly points out that prose is a mode with certain general characteristics: “[W]hile prose poetry is a genre or form, poetic prose describes a prose *style*. It is precisely this style that cannot be contained inside the severe perimeters of the prose poem. Prose enacts a continuum, a process that moves the reader and itself inexorably onward (not necessarily forward). Poetic prose facilitates this movement by characteristically florid verbosity. The style of the prose poem, on the other hand, is constrained by a relatively unnatural brevity.”¹⁵

Her discussion of poetic prose and its “florid verbosity” supports the importance of making a clear distinction between the prose poem (as a compressed and concise literary form) and the more general notion of poetic prose. While poetic prose often features an explicit use of elaborate literary figures and an expressively meandering way of moving—often across many pages—the prose poem is necessarily short, often less than one page. Prose poetry is a disciplined form that implicitly asserts and reveals some significant continuities between poetry and prose, making clear that poetry—as well as being written in verse or free verse—may be written in the mode of prose.

The opening of one of the well-known works from Simic’s volume *The World Doesn’t End* illustrates these distinctions nicely:

We were so poor I had to take the place of the
bait in the mousetrap. All alone in the cellar, I
could hear them pacing upstairs, tossing and turn-
ing in their beds.¹⁶

We discuss this work at greater length in the chapters that follow, but it is useful to note at this juncture that it is written in the mode of prose while inhabiting the genre of poetry, and it takes the form of a prose poem. This is to say that despite conveying a brief narrative, its main meanings derive from the weird, open, and poetic suggestiveness of its imagery. Works such as this one do not constitute a genre in their own right and are best understood as a form of poetry.

PROSAIC POETRY AND POETIC PROSE

Before we discuss the features of prose poetry in more detail, it is worth remembering that the differences between lineated lyric poetry and poetic prose (other than in their use of lines and stanzas compared to sentences and paragraphs) have never been entirely clear-cut. This has especially been the case since the advent of so-called free verse in the nineteenth century, where many free verse poems tended to be prosaic in their rhythms, even as they exploited line breaks for poetic effect. The nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman, for instance, frequently constructed his poems as if they were an exotic species of prose:

Trippers and askers surround me,
People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward
and city I live in, or the nation,
The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new,
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, works, compliments, dues,
The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,
The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss or lack of
money, or depressions or exaltations,¹⁷

This example from “Song of Myself” exemplifies Whitman’s fondness for catalogs or lists. It has a striking poetic effect that owes part of its power to literary techniques with broadly reiterative and repetitive tendencies that have been employed since antiquity. His poetic rhythms also draw on the demotic rhythms of speech and some of the rhythms of prose fiction—remembering that he started out as a novelist rather than a poet.

While in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) Whitman is indubitably a poet rather than a prose writer, it can be hard at times to pinpoint exactly what makes his work poetry, apart from his use of the reiterative and repetitious effects mentioned, rhythmic and figurative language (something also employed by prose writers), and his use of lineation (allowing each of his poetic lines a sense of standing apart

from—while also interacting with—every other line). D. S. Mirsky writes that Whitman’s “innovations in form are directly derived from his novelty of content . . . involving a liquidation of the dignity of the disparity between the conventional, stylized and retrospective idiom of elevated poetry and the language of the present.”¹⁸

Whitman elevates his language, but he does so cunningly by accumulating and juxtaposing strings of words that are associated with both the commonplace and the abstract, while also suggesting, but failing to fulfill, possible narrative threads. For instance, when he evokes “My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues, / The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,”¹⁹ we are privy only to glances at, and glimpses of, a much larger whole. In this way, his poetry often has a fragmentary air that emphasizes the evocative and the suggestive rather than the conclusive—despite the considerable length of some poems. He makes his free verse innovations into poetry partly through harnessing prose rhythms for poetic purposes and is one of the first writers in the English language to demonstrate how profoundly “prose” and “poetry” may be meshed in their various effects.

If poetry may make profitable use of “prosaic” effects, so a great deal of prose may be characterized as musical or rhythmical and thus, at least to some extent, “poetic”—and there are many examples throughout the history and development of prose writing traditions in English. Charles Dickens opens his long novel *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) with a rhythmic series of paragraphs. This work was begun in the same year that Whitman published his first version of “Song of Myself,” and only a decade and a half prior to the publication of Charles Baudelaire’s *Paris Spleen*, which we discuss as the book that inaugurated contemporary prose poetry. Dickens’s language is hypnotic:

Thirty years ago, Marseilles lay burning in the sun, one day.

A blazing sun upon a fierce August day was no greater rarity in southern France then, than at any other time, before or since. Everything in Marseilles, and about Marseilles, had stared at the fervid sky, and been stared at in return, until a staring habit had become universal there. Strangers were stared out of countenance by staring white houses, staring white walls, staring white streets, staring tracts of arid road, staring hills from which verdure was burnt away. The only things to be seen not fixedly staring and glaring were the vines drooping under their load of grapes. These did occasionally wink a little, as the hot air barely moved their faint leaves.²⁰

This is an example of discursive prose rather than of prose poetry, but it uses some of the devices often associated with poetry, most conspicuously, vivid image-making and insistent repetition, along with some noticeably iambic rhythms.

Although the passage is in one sense descriptive, as it develops over its first few pages it functions somewhat like a poem in becoming an extended metaphor for

central preoccupations of the novel that it begins—foregrounding, for instance, tropes of confinement, the contrast between what is “outside” and what is “inside,” dissipation of various kinds, and the idea of being watched. When considered next to the excerpt from Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” this passage demonstrates that prose and poetry often share features, and make use of similar or related techniques, even if they are not the same. Andy Brown—using the term “prose poetry” rather loosely—writes, “Prose poetry . . . occurs in the early sacred texts of other cultures” and “[a]ncient prose poetry also occurs in secular books.”²¹ He notes that long before Dickens, the tradition of poetic prose had myriad manifestations, and he cites the *Pillow Book* of Sei Shōnagon as an example of “a list-like book akin to many present-day variations on the prose poem.”²²

A PROSAIC AGE

We live in a prosaic age. Most of what we read in books, on the web, in emails, in text messages, on social media, and in the mass media is written in prose. The novel remains the most popular and salable literary form, and popular and genre prose fiction is published and sold in vast numbers across the world. And yet, readers continue to engage with poetry, especially when they want to express deep feelings or emotions connected to what they consider sacred. We all go to weddings and funerals where well-known poems, many of them written in verse, have a significant place in ceremonies, in much the same way that greeting cards use verse to mark an occasion or celebration.

However, the lineated lyric poem—usually a heightened form of writing—is now being written and read in different ways than it once was, and it does not serve all contemporary poetic needs. Jonathan Culler suggests that the reason for this is “the centrality of the novel to theoretical discourse as well as to literary experience and literary education.”²³ People are schooled in, and increasingly tend to understand literature in terms of, the conventions of prose. This means that the traditional lyric poem’s formalities may seem forced, puzzling, or out of place to many readers—and to some writers too. Even at weddings and funerals, their forms of utterance may seem to belong to another world, and to earlier conventions.

Prose poetry has the potential to cross the divide between the urge toward poetry—its capacity to articulate what is otherwise unsayable—and the more discursive and narrative-driven prose of novels, biographies, and the like. Prose poetry understands prose’s conventions and its constituent parts—its sentences and paragraphs—while also being conspicuously a form of poetry, and sometimes even lyrical in its inflections. Prose poetry shares with traditional lyric poetry a resistance to conclusive theorization—that is, both forms engage with the mysterious and the ineffable—and, as mentioned above, it presents further challenges because it is poetry written in a mode more often associated with the fiction and nonfiction genres. Indeed, some theories about the lineated lyric poem may be

applied directly to discussions of prose poetry, helping to confirm that the prose poem is a form of poetry. One example is Mutlu Konuk Blasing's statement: "Poetry is a cultural institution dedicated to remembering and displaying the emotionally and historically charged materiality of language,"²⁴ an assertion that both prose poems and lineated lyric poems are able to demonstrate.

Despite some broad similarities of this kind, lyric poetry and prose poetry do not operate in the same way, and scholars have been quick to discuss this. Mark Irwin highlights one of the points of divergence between the two kinds of writing when he argues that while prose poetry does not necessarily "tolerate distortion and disjunction more readily than the lyric poem," nevertheless "the prose poem does allow it to occur less dramatically. Its pedestrian, unadorned nature seems more open to sudden changes that might appear histrionic or cloying in verse."²⁵ Molly Peacock contends that "[p]oetry seeks to name; [conventional] prose seeks to explain."²⁶

If "the prose poem reflects the crisis of lyric poetry in a prosaic age, where traditional notions of the lyric have become increasingly problematic,"²⁷ then prose poetry is not only a development of the way writers express the poetic impulse but is perhaps an index of how traditional lineated lyric poetry is increasingly being replaced—and, in the process, transformed—by prosaic modes. Adrian Wanner remarks on how, in the Russian nineteenth-century writer Ivan Turgenev's and in Baudelaire's prose poetry, one can "find individual prose poems . . . that feature a distinct rhythmic structure, an abundance of metaphors, or an emotional lyric content, [and] it is also possible to find other prose poems by the same authors that lack all of those features. Some texts . . . seem to be written in a deliberately plain, 'prosaic' fashion."²⁸

Such points demonstrate that prose poems are not simply lineated lyric poems in another guise because, to a significant extent, they represent a transformation and reorientation of traditional lyric forms and conventions. Any suggestion to the contrary downplays the particular qualities that enable prose poems to create significantly different effects and meanings from the contemporary lineated lyric poem. These differences have to do with the way prose works on the page: its sentence and paragraph structures, its kinds of condensations, its refusal to break its sentences into lines in the manner of lineated poems, and its tendency—as Kathryn Oliver Mills states in discussing Baudelaire's prose poetry—to restore "the relationship between poetry and the world" and to register "everyday life."²⁹

Furthermore, as Margueritte Murphy notes, prose poetry allows for the heterogeneous and heteroglossic much more than traditional lyric poetry, opening up the space of poetic utterance to greater variety than much of lyric poetry easily allows.³⁰ For example, in prose poems we often find the voice of an author mingled with the voices of characters; or other, sometimes intertextual or historical, voices; or contemporary references (bringing with them their own "voices"), in ways that create a sense of an unsettled whole; or a whole composed of disparate, disjunct,

and sometimes fragmented parts. Such effects mimic some of the techniques of novels or short fiction but, in doing so, put them under the pressure of the prose poem's very limited space—and sometimes even force them into a kind of prose-poetical rupture.

For instance, in a work entitled “Oklahoma” (2017)—quoted at length in chapter 2—Hala Alyan includes, in a single paragraph, references to her childhood, the contemporary lives of the Cherokee in Oklahoma, and the history of European settlement of Oklahoma, as well as a voice that directly utters a phrase that encapsulates twenty-first-century racial prejudice: “For a place I hate,” she begins, “I invoke you often. Stockholm’s: I am eight years old and the telephone poles are down, the power plant at the edge of town spitting electricity.”³¹

Such a poem combines and condenses the robust qualities of good prose with the figurative features of much lineated lyric poetry, and is an example of how the best prose poets pay the kind of attention to the resources and features of prose that good lyric poets pay to the resources of their poetic lines. Prose poets are particularly interested in how prose sentences and paragraphs may be poetically suggestive even when they may not have the kind of heightened tonality one would usually associate with the “poetic.” Indeed, in some cases—and as Wanner has noted—prose poetry does not appear obviously “poetic” at all. That is one of its apparently contradictory or paradoxical features. It is able to find ways of identifying as poetry, even when employing “prosaic” techniques and effects.

Notwithstanding Simic’s uncertainty about how to classify his small prose-poetical works, a writer cannot simply write a block of “poetic” text and then decide that it will work equally well as a lineated free verse poem or as a prose poem. Although the innovations of the French Romantic prose poets transformed French and international poetry, their prose poetry remained a form of poetry despite its construction in sentences and paragraphs. The tendency for this form of poetry to challenge or stretch our assumptions about what the poetic looks like is one of its strengths. Prose poetry implicitly states that the poetic penetrates further than perhaps any of us had previously imagined.

In successful prose poetry, the mode of prose is not used in the same way one finds in most conventional and discursive novels or nonfiction. Prose becomes a revitalized medium that focuses less on a narrative’s progress through chronological time and more on creating what Jonathan Culler has referred to, when discussing the traditional lyric, as the “present time of discourse,” with associated “ritualistic” and “hyperbolic” qualities.³² Ali Smith even posits, “[t]he prose poem provides a home to the sentence that refuses to make sense and the paragraph that refuses to progress.”³³ Because of its transformative elements, prose poetry is able to enliven the common prosaic language of our era, reminding us that many and diverse kinds of language use are, at least potentially, “poetic,” and drawing attention to ways in which language itself, and its ways of making meaning, may be understood newly and differently. Now that meter and rhyme are not so often

used in poetry, and now that free verse poetry may be very free indeed, poetry chiefly inheres in condensed and suggestive writing—some in lines and some in sentences—that is neither primarily aimed to accomplish a particular act in the world nor primarily directed toward narrative or explication.

This is why the term “prose poetry,” while sometimes controversial, is an important one. Stephen Fredman prefers to use the term “poet’s prose” instead of “prose poem” to refer to “[prose] works that are conceived of and read as extensions of poetry,” believing “prose poem” to be “an oxymoron . . . redolent with the atmospheric sentiment of French Symbolism.”³⁴ However, in the English-language tradition, to call prose poetry by a name such as “poet’s prose” (or “poetic prose”) radically changes the emphasis. The usual term, “prose poetry” rightly emphasizes that the form is poetry—as Terrance Hayes writes in his discussion of Lauren Russell’s “Dream-Clung, Gone,” “since ‘poem’ is the noun and ‘prose’ the adjective, the prose poem must essentially be a poem.”³⁵ Therefore, prose poems have the features we have described while poet’s prose often has other characteristics entirely.

SOME CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE PROSE POEM FORM

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the prose poem has evolved in numerous directions in various countries, and prose poets have done so many different things with the form that it is difficult to summarize all of its developments. Anthologists of prose poetry have frequently reiterated points similar to Delville’s—that “there may be as many kinds of prose poems as there are practitioners of the prose poem.”³⁶ Jeremy Noel-Tod says something similar in his editorial introduction to *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem: From Baudelaire to Anne Carson* (2018), an anthology consisting of “two hundred prose poems from around the world.”³⁷ He states, “After reading so many, I can only offer the simplest common denominator: a prose poem is a poem without line breaks. Beyond that, both its manner and its matter resist generalization.”³⁸ In their introduction to *The Valley Press Anthology of Prose Poetry*, Anne Caldwell and Oz Hardwick comment that “many definitions have been proposed (or imposed), yet the prose poem always wriggles free through one of the cracks, dusts itself off, and stands proud as an outlaw challenging its own *Wanted* poster . . . [and] it is perhaps its mercurial resistance to definition which has led to a growth of interest in the prose poem in the second decade of the twentieth-first century.”³⁹

The poet Michael Benedikt is one of a number of writers who have attempted to define the main features of the prose poem more precisely, aiming in his introduction to *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology* (1976) to unify “different kinds of prose poems” by pointing to five properties that all prose poems have in common. He claims that they turn on “individual imagination” and, also, that they demonstrate an attention to the unconscious, an accelerated use of the colloquial, a visionary thrust, humor, and an element critical of oppressive realities.⁴⁰

While Benedikt's summary is astute, it does not encompass many of the approaches, properties, and varieties evident in contemporary prose poetry being published internationally—something Holly Iglesias comments on when she writes that Benedikt's "selections in his anthology reflect this emphasis on the importance of the workings of the individual unconscious and on comic irony, but at the expense of works that are lyrical, unwitty, embodied or relational."⁴¹

In the second half of the twentieth century, Robert Bly's views on prose poetry were influential, partly because of his editorship of the literary magazines *The Fifties*, *The Sixties*, and *The Seventies*. He discussed prose poetry in various essays and interviews and, for instance, said to Peter Johnson in 1998, "the most wonderful thing about the prose poem is that no one has set up the standards yet." He also commented, "What is the proper subject for a prose poem? There is no answer for that, so you have to look at your own life."⁴² Despite this, in his later essays, he outlined what he saw as the varieties of prose poetry. Iglesias summarizes these categories, pointing to their shortcomings:

Bly's later essays delineated three distinct strains of prose poetry: fables (with David Ignatow, Charles Simic, and Russell Edson as modern masters), post-Romantic "fire prose" (perfected by Rimbaud), and the "object/thing poem" (as written by Bly, Francis Ponge, Tomas Tranströmer, and James Wright). Some of his commentary manifests the underpinnings of male prose poetry—*anxiety, self-indulgence, distance from and yearning for the body, excess intellection.*⁴³

In making his distinctions, Bly did seem to neglect the work of significant women prose poets, and he also risked limiting rather than liberating the bounds of prose poetry and its possibilities. French scholar Suzanne Bernard takes a very different approach from Bly's in her outline of "four requirements" for the prose poem, but her list is broad and can perhaps be applied to other kinds of writing as well as the prose poem: "it had to embody the poet's intention, it had to have an organic unity, it had to be its own best excuse for being, and it had to be brief."⁴⁴

The contemporary prose poem is so many things at once, and so protean and hybrid, that no summary will successfully delineate its borders or indicate the scope of its preoccupations and approaches. Indeed, prose poetry is undergoing a process not dissimilar to the emergence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the modern prose novel. The early novel included prose romances, sentimental works, realistic works, and a wide variety of other kinds of writing. Furthermore, the development of the novel involved a great deal of hybridization and experimentation. Patricia Meyer Spacks observes:

By the 1760s, when [Laurence Sterne's] *Tristram Shandy* was being written, several distinct subgenres [of the novel] had been established . . . The playfulness of *Tristram Shandy*, then, not only foretells that of postmodernism . . .

[but] also testifies to how much had happened to the novel in the few years since its invention as a form distinct from the seventeenth-century romance.⁴⁵

The prose poem is undergoing a similar evolution that sees many writers experimenting with the form and helping to make it a vigorous site of literary innovation.

Prose poetry's diversity does not challenge the integrity of its form. Rather, it attests to the form's resilience, along with its capacity to embrace great variety and to surprise in its expressiveness. This may make the contemporary prose poetry environment somewhat unstable, but variety and surprise are a characteristic of all truly significant literary forms and genres, as writers test what they can achieve within given boundaries and, in doing so, compel a form or genre to continue to evolve. Prose poetry's variousness is, for example, no greater than the diversity that continues to be a feature of the novel—*Tristram Shandy's* (1759) experimentation with form has been extended by countless authors over the last three centuries and, as this has happened, definitions of the novel have continued to be modified. And, with respect to lineated lyric poetry, C. W. Truesdale has written, "though the prose poem has come down to us in many varieties, it is no more varied than its lineated counterpart for which that question of definition, seldom, if ever, arises."⁴⁶ While prose poetry possesses many different and sometimes incompatible-seeming characteristics, the form in general is able to be recognized by certain conspicuous features.

THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE PROSE POEM

One of the popular definitions of prose poetry is by Benedikt, who suggests that prose poetry "is a genre of poetry, self-consciously written in prose, and characterized by the intense use of virtually all the devices of poetry."⁴⁷ This is true enough, but prose poems also have additional features. They are never entirely driven by narrative and are always trying to point to something about their language or their subject that sits outside of any narrative gestures they make (and frequently outside of the work itself). Consequently, prose poems may be understood as fragments—they never give the whole story and resist closure.

As a result of this compression and brevity, prose poets regularly make use of literary techniques that suggest additional meanings beyond the literal, emphasizing the evocative and even the ambiguous, and creating resonances that move expansively outward. In prose poems the "poetic" inhabits language and, as it were, colors sentences and paragraphs to the extent that their denotative qualities are overwhelmed by the connotative. Thus, prose poetry tends to work analogically, metaphorically, or metonymically (we discuss these features in subsequent chapters).

This emphasis on the connotative in prose poetry (i.e., the secondary or associative meanings of words and expressions) partly answers John Taylor's concern: "The greatest obstacle facing prose-poem investigators is comprehending how prose is given that extra 'something'—a wisp of charm, an aura of mystery, an electric shock—convincing us that we are dealing stylistically with a prose poem—that is, poetry—and not, say, a newspaper sketch, an oft-humorous literary form that took flight during the nineteenth century and sometimes approaches the prose poem in spirit."⁴⁸ Sometimes the abundance of connotation in prose poems creates a sense that its meanings are hard to pin down, or mysterious because so much suggestiveness is wrapped into its apparently simple form.

Prose poems frequently suggest that powerful unseen and unconscious forces are at work in human experience, as well as in language, and such forces are, for example, explored in the surrealistic and neo-surrealistic prose poetry traditions. These traditions emphasize the dreamlike, sometimes creating a sense that particular prose poems constitute instances of the Freudian *uncanny*: "everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light."⁴⁹ At other times, when prose poems work analogically, their compressed texts speak sideways, or point laterally to additional understandings, implicitly indicating issues and topics other than those they directly address. Alternatively, whole prose poems may become metaphorical to the extent that nothing in the work escapes the metaphorical tropes and structures. In such cases, there may be no "literal" reading of a prose poem available.

Prose poems also make use of various different typographical features that provide various signals to readers. For example, many prose poets emphasize that their works are prose poems by presenting them on the page as one, or a few, fully justified paragraphs. Each block of text is neatly rectangular and has a sense of being "made," much as many lineated poems do, because the form has the hallmarks of having been closely composed, with an outward appearance of regularity. These works are reminiscent of rooms viewed from above, suggesting the original meaning of the word "stanza" or "room."

Other prose poems are written in conventional paragraphs and appear at first glance to be ordinary prose. It is only upon reading them that surprises happen, and what appears to be a standard paragraph is outed as a prose poem—at which point poetry asserts itself over the idea of the prosaic. This unsettles the experience of reading because the familiar (the usual assumptions that attend on reading prose) is made strange. Gary Young is one of the major poet scholars focused on the orientation of the prose poem on the page. He has described the prose poem as "a poem that one might walk along rather than fall through."⁵⁰ In this way, Young points to the prose poem's "horizontal rather than vertical trajectory," which he says is evidence of its "democratic itinerary [and] engenders a resistance to hierarchy and to inflation."⁵¹

Reading prose poetry is often a fairly rapid experience, and some also tend to move quickly at the level of their sentences. In other respects, however, the experience can be drawn out, in the way that poetic tropes demand our attention and are able to slow our apprehension of time. Prose poems may also be just as rhythmic as lineated lyric poems, but their rhythms are those of prose rather than verse. Sometimes prose poems expand, balloon-like, as we read, and occasionally they seem much larger inside than on the outside, seeming to work a strange magic with our sense of time and space—not unlike a poetic version of the TARDIS. Many prose poems make significant use of visual (and other sensory) imagery, “showing” scenes and circumstances as vividly as a photograph and allowing the reader to enter works imaginatively—and, as it were, to “see” from inside them.

THE LENGTH OF THE PROSE POEM

Prose poetry is almost always brief, as befits the fragmentary—most scholars agree on this—but determining the appropriate maximum length for the prose poem is a hotly debated topic. Murphy questions what “brief” really means. She asks, “While long prose poems are rarer than prose poems of a page, or two, or three, should they be excluded by definition?”⁵² Jane Monson, on the other hand, is quite specific; prose poems should be “in length no more than a page, preferably half of one, focused, dense, justified, with an intuitive grasp of a good story and narrative, a keen eye for the unusual and surprising detail and images relative to that story, and a sharp ear for delivering elegant, witty, clear and subtly surreal pieces of conversation and brief occurrences, incidents or happenings.”⁵³

In her introduction to the *Prose Poem Issue* of the *Mississippi Review*, Julia Johnson embraces much longer examples of the form: “The prose poem’s length is generally half a page to three or four pages . . . If it’s longer than that, tension is weakened and it becomes more poetic prose than prose poetry.”⁵⁴ J. S. Simon concurs with the importance of maintaining tension in prose poetry but does not specify what “observably ‘short’” means: “not only are prose poems observably ‘short’ (and autonomous), but they must be so, for beyond a certain length, the tensions and impact are forfeited and [the prose poem] becomes—more or less—poetic prose.”⁵⁵

Because the prose poem turns on its appeal to compression and on establishing a tension generated by the close, and sometimes overlapping, contiguity between its parts—often connected to its refusal to be tied down to conclusive or single meanings—it is important that it does not begin to dilate. The brevity of the prose poem provides a necessary tension in the way that language intersects and unfolds within individual works, enabling the prose poem’s “paradoxical way of combining suggestiveness and completeness.”⁵⁶

Works that do dilate quickly become a species of discursive or “poetic” prose rather than prose poems—and we will argue in the chapters that follow that this

is true of some (often distinguished) works that have been called prose poems by their authors or by critics. These works tend to be insufficiently condensed or compressed to create the kinds of poetic effects we have outlined above as belonging to the prose poem. Perhaps for this reason, most of the prose poems collected in anthologies dedicated to the form are less than two pages in length, and an overwhelming number of them are less than half a page—although Jeremy Noel-Tod’s 2018 anthology, *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem*, includes more longer works than most anthologies.

Visually, the prose poem is easily identified if it is one page or less, as the reader is able to take in the entire work at a glance. In such cases, especially when the prose poem appears in a rectangular or justified form, there is considerable visual tension connected to the way in which it appears on the page—almost as if, to repurpose one of Steven Monte’s observations, there is an invisible fence around the work.⁵⁷ It is true that prose poetry sequences may range across many pages—in some instances even taking up a whole volume—but their component parts are generally more or less discrete and relatively brief, once again, often no more than a page in length. Such works are different from a single book-length work, and Alan Wall acknowledges this when he writes that the prose poem “cannot be book-length, though enough of them put together can make up a book. The prose concerned should show the same fastidiousness in regard to lexis, and exhibit the same vigour and coherence of rhythm, as verse.”⁵⁸

Given these considerations, we will argue that the majority of prose poems—as opposed to examples of poetic prose of one kind or another—are no more than one standard-sized page in length. There are exceptions, including prose poems that incorporate extra space via “free-lines,” which we discuss later in this volume, but certainly many of the most convincing prose poems—those that exemplify the possibilities of the form—make brevity and compression the rule.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PROSE POEM

Poetry has an ancient and venerable tradition (remembering—like the earliest extant version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*—the Sumerian lyric “The Love Song of Shu-Sin” has been dated to approximately 2000 BCE⁵⁹). Prose poetry may be a relatively new part of this tradition but, like the Sumerian lyric, it connects to a long-established human need to speak in ways that defy mundane and common-sense assumptions about the world, and that depart from the time-centered narratives and the discursive modes of most forms of storytelling. This is a need to speak of the unresolvable mysteries at the heart of both experience and language; to evoke, intuit, or summon the ineffable; and to celebrate what cannot be said through more prosaic or utilitarian uses of language.

Even in its contemporary manifestations, the prose poem has a complex history dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—and earlier if one

includes the late seventeenth-century Japanese development of the haibun, a form that combines haiku with tightly written, often imagistic prose poetry. Anthony Howell also connects the prose poem to the work of various “mystics and philosophers,” contending that an “aphorism with its laconic precision is equivalent to a prose ‘verse’ and there are several fine exponents of this usage.”⁶⁰ He gives an example from Baltasar Gracián’s *The Oracle: A Manual of the Art of Discretion* (sometimes translated as *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*), first published in Spanish in 1647. He also mentions the *Maxims and Moral Reflections* of François VI, Duc de La Rochefoucauld, first published in 1665, commenting that “[o]ften the maxims are single sentences” and that “the sentence, polished, finely calibrated, becomes an object constructed with art—a European form of the Haiku.”⁶¹ He includes in his praise the prose of Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, observing that “[y]ou can tell it’s poetry, surely, if you can open it anywhere and it takes your breath away.”⁶² Howell then identifies Thomas Traherne, in his seventeenth-century *Centuries of Meditations*, as “the pioneer of . . . [the prose poem] form” and characterizes the 1929 novel *Hebdomeros* by the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico as “a novel-length poem in prose.”⁶³

Yet, however complex the prose poem’s lineage may be, and however numerous and diverse its antecedents, the contemporary, vigorous form of the prose poem became established in the mid- and late nineteenth century when it was invented by a variety of groundbreaking French practitioners, including the poets Charles Baudelaire (in a work variously referred to as *Petits Poèmes en prose* or *Le Spleen de Paris* [*Paris Spleen*], 1869), Arthur Rimbaud (in *Une Saison en Enfer* [*A Season in Hell*], 1873; and *Illuminations*, 1886), and Stéphane Mallarmé (in *Divagations* [*Wanderings*], 1897). Also influential is the generally nostalgic works of Aloysius Bertrand in *Gaspard de la nuit: Fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot*, published in 1842, which powerfully impressed Baudelaire, and in which meditations, dreaming, and ideas about art take priority over any attempted narrative.

Such writers developed the prose poem as a new literary form in opposition to the conventional and rather inhibiting neoclassical rules of French prosody, which required poets to follow mandated metrical, rhythmic, and rhyming patterns. References to prose poetry’s rebellious and subversive tendencies partly derive from the form’s challenge to Alexandrine meter in nineteenth-century France and, in this context, prose poetry may be understood as a way of escaping from the confines of a conservative and stultifying literary traditionalism in that country. In his introduction to *Pastels in Prose* (1890), the first anthology of French prose poetry to be translated into English, W. D. Howells outlines the prose poem’s “beautiful reticence . . . as if the very freedom which the poets had found in their emancipation from the artificial trammels of verse had put them on their honor, as it were, and bound them to brevity.”⁶⁴

Prose poetry was undoubtedly partly an escape of this kind—a kind of Romantic coup against the established literary order—but, in making it, Baudelaire,

Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and their contemporaries drew on and transformed the eighteenth-century tradition of the French *poème en prose*. Poèmes en prose were usually extended works of nostalgic poetic prose (and were themselves an attempt to break with neoclassical poetic forms). Nineteenth-century prose poets adapted this earlier *poème en prose* tradition by writing shorter, pithier, and more vernacular works than it had produced, as they frequently addressed aspects of city life.

Fabienne Moore, in his searching study of the eighteenth-century *poème en prose*, argues that the form enables the claim that “[p]rose poems are one of the least known ‘inventions’ of the French Enlightenment.” He states, “the melancholy rising from modernity is tied to the rise of prose poems as a hybrid and unstable genre.”⁶⁵ And, despite his caveat that “eighteenth-century prose poems defy terminology,” he characterizes *poèmes en prose* in the following manner:

As far as their poetic diction is concerned, parataxis (short, declarative sentences without coordination or clauses) remained a favorite choice, reminiscent of the Old Testament. “Poèmes en prose” were often divided into “cantos,” like epic poems, and were usually long, from a few pages to several volumes. Titles, prefaces, and embedded meta-references invariably tried to establish the legitimacy of a poem *without* verse.⁶⁶

In other words, like many apparently sudden literary innovations, the nineteenth-century prose poem grew out of an extended literary and cultural gestation in a society that had been trying for many decades to find new literary forms to express its sense of a changing *zeitgeist*. Although these changes began with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment—and notwithstanding the *poème en prose*’s inventiveness—the Enlightenment *poème en prose* lacked the poetic energy and literary significance of the prose poetry produced by the Romantic French writers mentioned.

For example, when Moore writes of Jean-François Marmontel’s 1767 novel, *Bélisaire*, he highlights how Enlightenment writers of poetic prose were working in a tradition that was yet to be fully realized: “[S]ymptomatic of the hybridity of Enlightenment ‘poems en prose,’ it remains that Marmontel’s experimental cadenced prose led to a dead-end: borrowing measure and rhetoric from a moribund neoclassical poetry failed to capture music and images congenial to prose.”⁶⁷

Indeed, the eighteenth-century *poème en prose* may be interpreted as part of the development of the novel rather than as a new poetic form, because the eighteenth-century novel and the idea of poetic prose initially evolved at the same time—to the extent that, as Steven Monte observes, “if the eighteenth-century *poème en prose* is itself a quasi-novel (a romance or epic written in prose), the success of the nineteenth-century novel exerts pressure on poets to remodel the traditional lyric.”⁶⁸

In this way, the French tradition of *poème en prose* may be understood as different from the modern prose poem but as laying the groundwork for it. The

contemporary prose poem has a large taproot embedded in mid-nineteenth-century French literature, with smaller or lateral roots delving deeper into the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries. The prose poem should be considered a product of nineteenth-century Romanticism rather than of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, but its debt to the eighteenth century is clear.

However, the French prose poem was not a typical manifestation—if there is such a thing—of French Romanticism. Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and some of their peers grew sick of the more idealistic clichés of Romanticism and its more ego-centered poetic manifestations (notwithstanding their own capacity for self-absorption). They also became impatient with its veneration of classical culture and literature—one of Romanticism’s most important features, which we discuss in chapter 2—believing that poetry needed to address contemporary issues and experience in blunt terms, including French society’s failure to deliver what early Romantics had envisioned.

A pithy and brilliant formulation of these ideas occurs in a letter Arthur Rimbaud wrote to his friend Paul Demeny on May 15, 1871, in which he states that “Romanticism has never been carefully judged,” that Romantics’ songs are “seldom . . . *understood* by the singer,” and that “reviving those antiquities” is for others.⁶⁹ Damian Catani observes that Baudelaire (and Balzac) scarified aspects of contemporary urban life, and were

determined to replenish evil as a serious category of moral and intellectual thought . . . Their timely re-evaluation was based on the prescient realization that a post-Romantic, post-theological reinvigoration of evil . . . would most fruitfully be realized through a direct engagement with the previously unexplored urban vice and criminality of the new, expanding capitalist metropolis.⁷⁰

Catani also writes that Baudelaire’s work focuses on “Paris of the 1850s and 1860s that was caught in the throes of . . . radical urban transformation” and that this “encounter with modernity [he] considered to be far more relevant . . . than the hackneyed theological metaphysical approach of late Romanticism.”⁷¹

Baudelaire’s preface to *Paris Spleen* celebrates the autonomy of prose fragments in defiance of conventional notions of organically unified works (we discuss this further in chapter 2) and claims that his prose poems arose out of his experience of the city. In saying this, he demonstrates that in its inaugural phase, prose poetry, as David Evans says, “must not be allowed to settle or become predictable,” that “it is not simply in the static plan of a city that the inspiration for prose poetics is to be found” but that “a city [is] constantly in movement.”⁷² Nevertheless, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé responded differently to the stimulus of the metropolis—for instance, Helen Abbott notes, “[t]he risks posed by opening up one’s voice to the crowd through poetry are approached in different ways by Baudelaire and Mallarmé.”⁷³ This is because Baudelaire grants intimate and public conversa-

tions “the same status,”⁷⁴ whereas Mallarmé does not, and Rimbaud very much went in his own, proto-surrealistic direction before he stopped writing lineated poetry and prose poetry altogether.

Following on from French examples, there were a few rather sporadic nineteenth-century examples of prose poetry written in English. One example is the English (and, for a time, Australian) Richard H. Horne’s remarkably early “The Old Churchyard Tree: A Prose Poem” from 1850,⁷⁵ which Monte calls “a rarity” but notes that like most “English-language prose poems of this period,” it is “as filled with awkward gestures toward the poetic as their French counterparts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.”⁷⁶ American author Emma Lazarus’s “By the Waters of Babylon: Little Poems in Prose,” from the late 1880s, begins memorably with the image of “The Spanish noon” as “a blaze of azure fire.”⁷⁷ Such works remind one that, since the nineteenth century, poetic forms have generally become more prosaic—even as conventional verse forms continue in various guises. For example, despite continued use by some contemporary poets of meter and rhyme, in the twenty-first century most lineated lyric poetry is written in free verse, which is usually more prosaic in its rhythms than the traditional forms of verse it has replaced (at the end of the eighteenth century, almost all English-language poetry was written in verse).

Even elegies, traditionally written in poetic form, are flourishing in what John B. Vickery calls the “modern prose elegy.”⁷⁸ Vickery identifies the prose elegy in the work of novelists as diverse as James Joyce, William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Malcolm Lowry, and Joan Didion. He writes:

The intent is to trace the shift from the traditional elegy’s concerns to the attitudes evinced in the modern elegiac temper. The older [poetic] pastoral elegy dwelt exclusively . . . with the death of an individual and how to cope with it. The twentieth century gradually transformed the elegy into a focus on the diversity of losses occurring in human life . . . To the death of the individual, the modern elegy added most of the forms of personal, intellectual, and cultural loss suffered by mankind.⁷⁹

If the twentieth and twenty-first centuries may collectively be thought of as an age of prose, the growth of prose poetry is part of a broader development of prose modes, almost everywhere.

PROSE POETRY AS A JANUS-FACED FORM

Our discussion earlier in this chapter about prose poetry’s challenge to the notion that prose and poetry are, inherently, different kinds of writing not only takes up ideas considered by various contemporary critics, but it reflects debates about form and genre that were being contemplated even before the publication of Baudelaire’s groundbreaking *Paris Spleen* in 1869. As we mention above, the

idea of producing works written in poetic prose had begun to destabilize conventional notions about both poetry and prose well in advance of Baudelaire's work, primarily because of the hybrid nature of the eighteenth-century French *poème en prose*.

In the Romantic period, the more radical prose poetry of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and others was immediately viewed in many quarters as a bastard form—Adrian Wanner remarks on the way in which Bertrand and Baudelaire created “a new, dynamic aesthetic of surprise, turning the unaesthetic and ‘prosaic’ into the object of poetic discourse, and replacing the traditional emotive voice of the lyric with that of an ironically detached *flâneur*.”⁸⁰ Scott Carpenter explicitly identifies the perceived illegitimacy of this literary strategy in claiming, “Baudelaire’s practice of prose poetry engages in the unsettling blurring of lines that we associate with counterfeits: it is a kind of poetry that ‘masquerades’ as everyday prose, while nevertheless leading to certain [poetic] effects.”⁸¹ Edward Kaplan calls prose poetry an “amalgam” and contends that “Baudelaire . . . tangles the web of dualistic categories as he formulates a confluence of opposites.”⁸²

In other words, prose poetry has long been characterized as a kind of genre-crossing ugly duckling, and such ideas are hard to shake. When, in a prose poem from his “Mercian Hymns” sequence, one of Geoffrey Hill’s characters states “Not strangeness, but strange likeness,”⁸³ he might almost have been speaking about prose poetry itself. Prose poetry has “a strange likeness” to literary forms other than itself and yet it is different from all of them—or, to express this more accurately, it incorporates aspects of a variety of forms. It also tends to be characterized by various sorts of serious and not-so-serious playfulness. Ali Smith observes that it “retains its odour of paradox. Its facility for narrative play, and for play with language register, un-hierarchical patterns and unemphasised possibilities, its openness to ‘unpoetic’ language and language from a range of registers, are prospects that the form offers.”⁸⁴

Aware of such issues, and of the contrarian qualities associated with the form, a number of prose poets have resorted to writing explicitly and sometimes ironically about prose poetry, asserting in various works: “[a] prose poem should be as square as a Picasso pear”; “[p]rose-poetry is when a person behaves differently from what is considered normal”; “[w]e fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed”; and “[t]he prose poem is not a real poem of course.”⁸⁵ Campbell McGrath’s “The Prose Poem” begins:

On the map it is precise and rectilinear as a chessboard, though driving past you would hardly notice it, this boundary line or ragged margin, a shallow swale that cups a simple trickle of water, less rill than rivulet, more gully than dell, a tangled ditch grown up throughout with a fearsome assortment of wildflowers and bracken. There is no fence, though here and there a weathered post asserts a former claim.⁸⁶

To a significant extent, the issues raised by these works, and by the critical views we have quoted, relate to how one understands genre—and, more particularly, whether genre classifications are ever really as fixed or clear as we tend to assume. John Frow claims that genre classifications are often problematic and questions whether “texts in fact ‘belong’ to a genre, in a simple type/token relation (general form/particular instance), or should we posit some more complex relation, in which texts would ‘perform’ a genre, or modify it in ‘using’ it?”⁸⁷

Frow also asks, “What happens when genre frames change?” and “Do texts have a definite and fixed structure?”⁸⁸ If the broad classifications we apparently summon up by the terms “poetry” and “prose” may not denote clearly definable literary forms—although various forms, such as narrative poetry or the novel, are usually assumed to be a category of either poetry or prose fiction, but not both—and if the broad classifications we call “poetry” and “prose” are more elusive than we would often assume, then the prose poem may be a demonstration of how certain kinds of literary works appear unclassifiable primarily because of the shifting and sometimes ambiguous nature of the terms “poetry” and “prose.”

In this way, in terms of genre and form, prose poetry emphasizes the instability of what may otherwise look fixed and known, also emphasizing what is fluid and coming into being. Jahan Ramazani observes that a “genre’s others are often multiple,”⁸⁹ and the prose poem is the literary form that has frequently been characterized as “other” in this way. Frow has observed, “It seems to me important to stress the open-endedness of genres and the irreducibility of texts to a single interpretive framework . . . Texts work upon genres as much as they are shaped by them.”⁹⁰ It may be true that prose poetry constitutes an unusually open literary form that is shifting our ideas of literary form and genre even as we write.

The prose poem form is Janus-faced, looking forward and backward, understanding transitions, providing passages and doorways. Space opens before and behind it, sometimes like closed rooms, sometimes like expanding fields. It understands both prose and poetry, and it comfortably inhabits the mutual space they offer. Prose poetry’s challenge to conventional ideas about generic distinctions may be what makes it most modern (and postmodern) and which may see it become a defining twenty-first-century literary form. It may offer one way through the quagmire of generic classifications and, a little like a literary wormhole, take the reader into new and hitherto unexplored spaces.

Prose poetry may be conceived of as a new form of poetry to sit aside the forms of traditional lyric, narrative, and epic poetry. It may be viewed as a contemporary development of the possibilities of the poetic fragment, so beloved of the Romantic writers and so well suited to expressing meaning in a world where the grand narratives of the nineteenth century have long since been in disrepair. As the use of the prose mode in poetry challenges our understanding of literary forms and genres, it signals nothing less than that the main literary forms privileged in recent centuries—the novel, short fiction, lineated lyric poetry, and drama—may no

longer confidently be said to constitute or describe the structures of contemporary “literature.”

This is not a matter of agreeing with Maurice Blanchot that “[o]nly the book matters, such as it is, far from genres, outside of categories—prose, poetry, novel, testimony—under which it refuses to be classed.”⁹¹ Perhaps more crucially, an apparently undecidable literary form such as the prose poem opens up discussions about what the basis of poetry may be. If there are no firm zones of exclusion separating “poetry” and “prose,” then the more important distinction is between what is poetic (whether it occurs in poetry or prose) and what is prosaic (whether it occurs in prose or poetry). Christopher Prendergast writes, “part of the lesson of Rimbaud’s way with the prose poem or Laforgue’s experiments with *verse libre* is the blurring of the poetic/prosaic distinction.”⁹² In the twenty-first century the blurring of poetic/prosaic boundaries has advanced to the extent that the flourishing of prose poetry seems inevitable. It is a distinctive form that is helping to change our very understanding of literary categories.

THE PROSE POEM AND SUBVERSION

The prose poems of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé were questioned or repudiated in some quarters of nineteenth-century France for a variety of interconnected reasons—to do with their violations of what was understood to be correct poetic form, their sometimes lurid or unelevated subject matter, or because they were interpreted as critiquing the established French social and political orders. In these ways, early prose poetry was associated with the subversive, and understood to be a radical form associated with the French avant-garde.

We won’t rehearse early critiques of the form in any detail—they have been well documented in other texts—but much that was radical in the nineteenth century has now become fairly commonplace. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries all kinds of literature have been critical of social and political orders, and a sense of the fragmentation of culture has strongly shaped literary forms of all kinds. Thus, if prose poetry is still spoken of as a subversive form—and Marguerite Murphy says it is inherently subversive and even “hypersubversive”⁹³—this is in the context of a great deal of subversive twenty-first-century literature. We might even suggest that subversive literary practice has now become more or less normalized.

One example is the development of the so-called lyric essay, which incorporates various kinds of autobiographical and quasi-autobiographical material into the essay form, while also frequently fragmenting and problematizing the essay’s traditional forms. This problematization is sometimes squarely aimed at subverting the essay tradition, but more often it results from a lyric essayist’s attempt to register the kinds of meanings and effects associated with broken, truncated, only partly known or fragmented experience. Deborah Tall and John D’Agata remark,

“the lyric essay often accretes by fragments, taking shape mosaically . . . it may spiral in on itself, circling the core of a single image or idea,”⁹⁴ and Martha Aldrich adds:

The lyric essay does not narrate a story so much as express a condition—often named, sometimes called human, but still to us unknown. It reverses foreground and background, cultivating leaps and juxtaposition, tensing between the presentational and the representational. Associative, meditative, it abhors journalistic reportage. Its incompleteness is Romantic, revealed in lyric fragmentation, the infusion of imagination into the debris of fact.⁹⁵

Prose poets and lyric essayists are often, in their different ways, trying to get at the kinds of experiences they consider unable to be narrated by longer or more discursive literary forms, or fully evoked through traditional poetic forms—experiences that are hard to grasp or pin down, and are better gestured at than written out in full.

Many practitioners of both lyric essays and prose poetry try to find ways of speaking that have not been fully explored to date—combining fragments, elevated and ordinary diction, the quotidian, the ineffable, and almost anything else—from witty narratives like Benedikt’s prose poem “The Moralist of Bananas,” which begins, “A rustle from the vale—the Saint has gone out to the fields again, to the good, clear fields, there to preach a sermon to the bananas about the suggestiveness of their shapes,”⁹⁶ to sad metaphors such as “A poached egg without the pocket, embarrassed before the tongue’s eye. Have you ever felt like that?”⁹⁷ in Peter Johnson’s “Cannes.” Some writers are also engaged in a deliberate process of sidestepping the expectations that long-established literary forms and genres bring with them because all established forms carry associations from other historical periods that can be inhibiting, or seem to be prescriptive, or that demand a kind of superficial polish and finish that they wish to eschew. This is evident from the discussions of many American neo-surrealist prose poets who are at pains to describe the ways in which their prose poetry does not draw on the French symbolists (discussed in chapter 3).

Some scholars, such as Monte and Murphy, focus on prose poetry’s connection to American modernist poets, positing that previous scholarship has been French-centered.⁹⁸ Significant sections of Monte’s and Murphy’s books are devoted to discussions of John Ashbery. (We briefly discuss Ashbery’s *Three Poems* in chapter 10.) The length of these influential works problematizes their categorization as prose poetry. It may be better to understand these sometimes-meandering works as a form of poetic prose. Similarly, the so-called language poets can be seen as interrogating the connections—or continuum—between prose poetry and poetic prose, given the length and approach of many of their works. Shifting emphasis away from categorization, Marjorie Perloff argues—in line with language poetry founding member, Charles Bernstein—“the important distinction to be made is

not between ‘story’ and ‘prose poem’ or ‘story’ and ‘essay’ but . . . between different contexts of readings and different readerships.”⁹⁹ Language poets’ critique of conventional language use and its assumptions demands a new relationship between reader and text, and may be read as a form of subversion.

If, as we have indicated, prose poetry has frequently been defined as a form always and rather restlessly in opposition to, or undercutting other, more established literary forms and genres, this is a central reason why relatively few critics have been willing to fully recognize the prose poem for its own qualities. It has often been said to occupy a doubtful and in-between literary space, a kind of no-man’s-land. But a great deal of prose poetry has been confidently written for a century and a half, and while the form may still be in the process of defining itself, and may sometimes still be subversive of conventional prose and lineated poetry, it is hardly nascent or unformed. It is much more than a form written in opposition to other forms and genres.

THE FUTURE OF THE PROSE POEM

It is yet to be seen whether prose poetry will claim much of the territory occupied by the contemporary lineated lyric, but there is no question in the last few decades it has claimed *some* of this territory. It may well claim more as the twenty-first century progresses because (in most of its manifestations), it is a relatively user-friendly and versatile form. Prose poems often function like small, expansive packages of words that, while occasionally employing limited forms of narrative, ask the reader to engage with them immediately and as a whole. They are usually satisfying imaginatively because their emphasis is on connotation rather than denotation, and they also engage readers imaginatively by implicitly asking them to complete the information they supply. Many prose poems address familiar quotidian concerns, but their manner of doing so enables readers to gain new perspectives on situations that are both familiar in their outline and unfamiliar in the way in which they have been inflected poetically.

Prose poetry opens up the possibility that writers who would once have been poets, but who have not been schooled in ways of making lineated poems, may become poets by making use of prose as their chosen poetic medium. Certainly, as prose poetry mixes registers, moving fairly easily between elevated and demotic language, and as it offers the chance for writers to work impressionistically, metaphorically, and imagistically with prose paragraphs, so it enables prose writers who want to work in short forms an opportunity to expand their range into the poetic. Other very short forms, such as microfiction, are also available to prose writers, but where works of microfiction emphasize the movement of narrative through time—focusing on what happens, albeit in very few words—prose poetry tends to emphasize what *has happened* and *will always be happening*.

In the traditional lineated lyric, there is no real sense of chronological time, even if there is some narrative content, because the lyric exists to say what is and will be, rather than how one thing is contingent on another during a given time period—and many prose poems share this quality of seeming to exist outside of time. That is why Simic, who employs explicit narrative tropes in his prose poetry, remains a poet. His prose poetry is about certain qualities and inflections of existence, rather than about the *then and then* of narrative-driven storytelling. In the following prose poem, the shepherd's hour extends into the reader's time and space with its use of present tense, and its position as the final word. The hour is never fully realized and the person on the stove continues to be cooked:

From inside the pot on the stove someone
threatens the stars with a wooden spoon.
Otherwise, cloudless calm. The shepherd's hour.¹⁰⁰

What makes the prose poem form so flexible and appealing is its ability to place narrative in the service of poetry in a more naturalized way than in lineated lyric poems, because we are so used to narratives in prose—we often read various short and long prose narratives. Thus, a prose poem may play at creating a prose narrative without ever relinquishing its poetic purpose. And, more generally, prose poems may often seem to be what they are not, delighting or challenging the reader by the manner in which they manipulate readerly expectations.

Prose poetry has the great advantage of being, especially in its English-language manifestations, a relatively new form. It will, like all literary forms, age over time, but at the moment the boundaries of the prose poem are being expanded. In a prosaic age, poetry—which has always been at the center of human literary activity—may have found in prose poetry an important way forward. Prose poetry has the prospect of becoming as significant to the writing of poetry generally as free verse has been to the writing of lineated lyric poems. In offering new ways forward, it opens up numerous possibilities.

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