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Tracing the prose poem: an introduction

Just a couple of decades ago, prose poetry occupied a very minor corner of the poetry spectrum, although many major poets have published works in that form. As early as the mid-1970s, anthologies of prose poems were emerging in the USA, but they were preceded by work produced in Europe: the nineteenth-century Romantic Fragment (which was quickly adopted by British Romantics), and then the early twentieth-century experiments, and particularly the poetic avant garde in France. Now it is becoming (almost) a staple; across Australia and internationally, major poets are adding the prose poem form to their oeuvre, and though few dedicated publications yet exist, prose poems are salting the competitions, collections, anthologies and literary journals. International poets too are extending into the prose poem, exploring its affordances.

Scholarly writings on the prose poem trace its history, and discuss its difficult relationship to genre: is it a fragment; or a very short story; or an imagistic moment; or just a poem without line breaks? Is it, in fact, even a poem? Glyn Maxwell suggests not:

line-break is all you've got, and if you don't master line-break—the border between poetry and prose—then you don't know there is a border. And there is a border. (A prose poem is prose done by a poet.) (Maxwell 2012: 12)

Maxwell's insistence on that border is echoed to some extent by Ron Silliman in his 1987 essay 'The new sentence' (though he does come around to acknowledging the poetic ontology of the prose poem). Overall though, the weight of opinion—and of practice—is with the prose poem as a valid poetic form. If we set aside its long historical identity (emerging fleetingly, but convincingly, from Aristotle to the present), it seems clear that poets, across the centuries, have played with form, and with the affordances of the sentence rather than the line. Though typically scholars look first to Europe (specifically, France and Germany) and then to the USA, it emerges elsewhere—sometimes forcefully. This is explained variously: for Todorov and Berrong (1976: 160), it is a question of the development of poetic expression, and a resistance to old forms. For Tom Shapcott (2002), it is the expression of a valid poetic form in Australia, and elsewhere. For Horst Zander, there is a cultural dimension, evidenced by the fact that there is, in black South African writing, 'not even a real distinction between verse and prose'. This writing, he argues, is characterised by a refusal to follow 'the Western compartmentalization of literature into different genres' (Zander 1999), so that the 'problem' of the status of the prose poem, and the apparent distinction between prose and poetry, becomes in this perspective, an irrelevance.

Like the scholars and critics, the contributors to this special issue address the ontological and axiological status of the prose poem, explicitly responding to the comparative uncertainty and permeability of the name 'prose poem'. They look at questions of taxonomy and nomination; essay definitions of prose poems; and locate this form in relation to other concise lyric modes of writing. **Michel Delville** challenges the easy association of the prose poem with 'micro-essays' or 'proems' and, reading from Baudelaire and Duchamp through to Simic and Waldrop, locates the various related forms in their discrete contexts. **Margueritte Murphy** offers a history of the prose poem from the early twentieth century, exploring the effect of translating poetry into prose, and the nominative impulse that allowed the form to become almost invisible (because unnamed) before it found its name and with that its identity later in the century. **Peter Johnson**, again engaging the history of the form, reminds readers of the comic potential of the prose poem, its dada elements and impossible juxtapositions.

Dominique Hecq revisits the possible utility of concepts of genre, and locates prose poems in the border zone between prose and verse. **Owen Bullock**, attending to the work of Alan Loney, explores issues of poetic experiment, and points to the flexibility and capacity of this small form. **Alyson Miller** addresses at the politics of writing through a focus on Ania Walwicz while **Mags Webster**, similarly addressing the practice of writing, knits together poetry and silence.

Lisa Matthews introduces the multi-aspect prose poem, and ways in which such works might extend poetic possibilities. Treading similar terrain, **Cathryn Perazzo** and **Sif Dal** examine the scholarship into both prose poetry and flash fiction by performing their differences and samenesses. **A Frances Johnson** puts prose to work in an account of critical/political poetic responses to tourism, migration and the plight of refugees in the contemporary world. **Sue Joseph**, also working with the concept of travel, draws on journalism to explain her approach, which involves crafting prose poems from found material in legacy newspapers. **Peter Anderson** offers prose poem work from both the fragment tradition (by structuring natural narrative from notebook entries) and in its lineated lyric tradition.

Again beginning from questions of form and technique, **Paul Hetherington** and **Cassandra Atherton** present the prose poem as a vehicle for imagery and empathy, its concision and its room-like shape (the stanza) providing clear borders in which it can produce and perform its effects. **Paul Munden** discusses the affordances of the prose poem for dealing with time, and the 'simultaneous stretching and compacting of time' evident in many poems. **Shane Strange** challenges the easy divide posited between these various modes of writing with his exploration of theories of form and poetics alongside questions of practice, and **Monica Carroll** and **Jen Webb** come to similar conclusions in their contrast between 'what the scholars say' about prose poetry and 'what the poets say', contrasting discussions of form and definition in the literature with discussions of process and play that emerged in analysis of a corpus of research interviews with contemporary poets.

We have included a subsection that introduces and contextualises what was the generative impulse for this Special Issue: the **Prose Poetry Project**, housed at the International Poetry Studies Institute in the University of Canberra, and including

writers from Australia, Singapore, Israel and the UK. This incorporates several vignettes by members who live outside Australia, along with a short background essay and a selection of poems produced and published over the past (nearly) three years.

Finally, there is a selection of poems that perform the concepts explored in the essays. **Justin Clemens** disrupts both prose and poem in his socio-political found nonsense work using homophonic translations of scientific, legal, journalistic, and personal tweets; **Peter Anderson** eschews the paragraph in favour of lineated sentences; and all 26 poets who are, or have been, members of the Prose Poetry Project are represented by one of their poems, published in one of the annual anthologies of the group's output.

We hope that readers will find, in these contributions, a fresh way of seeing, reading, and thinking the concept of both poetry and prose.

Works cited

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