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JOHN SIMON

THE PROSE POEM
AS A GENRE IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY
EUROPEAN LITERATURE

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THE PROSE POEM:
A STUDY OF A GENRE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
EUROPEAN LITERATURE

A thesis presented
by
John Ivan Simon
to
The Department of Comparative Literature
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for the degree of
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in the subject of
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Introduction to the Garland Edition

There are many things I would do differently were I writing this dissertation today. To make all the desired changes, nothing short of complete rewriting would do. This, obviously, is impracticable. I hope, however, that the work may have its uses even in its present - or, rather, past - form. The one thing I regret most is not being able to correct the grammar and syntax. In the intervening years, I have become enamored of (some would say besotted with) correct English, or, at any rate, what I take to be correct English. The aging critic John Simon shakes his head at the solecisms and catachreses of the doctoral candidate John Simon, not to mention the latter's prolixity and propensity to quote too much, just to prove that he has done his homework - the graduate-student disease.

These things aside, however, I feel that the thesis is an honest piece of work, grappling to the best of its author's abilities - such as they then were and, worse luck, still may be - with thorny issues. The reader of the following pages will, I fear, find many of the thorns on which I stabbed myself still unremoved. But perhaps also, here and there, the flower of an insight.

John Simon

PREFACE

The reader of this work may be struck by a considerable difference of approach from chapter to chapter. For this there are two good reasons, and one bad one. Let us take the good reasons to begin with. First, it seemed to me that different writers placed the emphasis on different aspects of their prose poetry, so that in analyzing works of such diverse types, the measuring instruments had to vary also. Secondly, I must admit that I did not begin writing this study with a full knowledge of all the questions involved, any more than I am ending it with a full knowledge of all the answers; and that, precisely because this work is a study, I wished to show the reader by what steps I moved forward, how one thing led to another, and how, therefore, the investigation became, I hope, more cogent as it went along. The reader might thus have the choice of two satisfactions: either he will make certain discoveries gradually, as I made them, and so get more in step with, more involved in, the proceedings; or he may anticipate some of my findings, figure out things before I did, and rejoice (deservedly) in his own speedier and superior perceptions so much as to let my own plodding analysis reap (undeservedly) some of the benefits of his exhilaration. The third, and bad, reason for some dissimilarity between earlier and later sections of the work is the number of years elapsed between the writing of those sections. I do not mean to imply that it is bad for one to grow older and, if not wiser, different (though such an argument could, alas, be

made); I am deploring merely my own tardiness which deprived these pages of truer homogeneity. On the other hand, if years bring clarity and simplicity, the disparity in question ends up as something desirable, and my bad reason turns into a halfway good one. Let us hope that the obverse is not equally true.

Two specific questions should be answered here. Why is there so much discussion of Guérin's psyche, and what various people thought of it, and so little, relatively, of the details of his work? And why is so much attention devoted to the debunking of dubious, sometimes downright foolish, Rimbaud criticism? The answer to the first question is: considering that we have only one finished prose poem from the hand of Guérin, there already exists enough sensible commentary on the actual work, as I duly note in the proper place, and little was left to say on that score; but I was interested in tracking down the mental processes of one of the first two writers of genuine prose poems, in the hope that this may shed some light on the genesis of the genre—with what success, the reader will judge for himself. Moreover, while writing on prose poems, I could not help becoming involved with the men who wrote them, the prose poets, to the extent that where I felt that they had been misunderstood or misrepresented, I owed it to them, and to the reader, to set matters straight. This is partly the answer to the second question, too, and is one of the reasons that the chapter on Rimbaud is also, to some extent, a sottisier. But there is another reason here: Rimbaud's poems are difficult and explications were

called for; now since few people have been more widely and wildly misinterpreted than Rimband (to the extent of driving that defender of common sense, M. Etienne, very nearly paranoid), it became incumbent on me to dispel certain prevalent false interpretations before my own, admittedly tentative ones, could begin to get a fair hearing.

Two further comments. First, I have reprinted the texts discussed where the space allotted to a particular chapter permitted this, or where a text seemed very important and hard to come by; but where the chapter already bulged ominously, I regretfully refrained from including such texts as could be readily obtained by the reader. Secondly, I was constantly confronted with the problem of terminology, of which I shall give one typical example. There is in English no term to designate the parts into which a prose poem is divided, i.e. the passages between one indentation and the next. Rather than borrow the French verset, which would not have been quite accurate (as I explain elsewhere) and might have seemed affected, I chose to speak, alternately, of paragraphs or stanzas, neither of which is wholly correct, but the alternate use of which would make for variety, and also keep steadily before our eyes the curious dual nature of that charming hermaphrodite, the prose poem.

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INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of This Work

What can be achieved by the analysis of the development of a literary genre through a certain period of years? Art, we may concede, holds a mirror up to nature, and particular art-forms, like particular mirrors, reflect its different aspects. For as the mirror in a telescope and the glass on a lady's dressing table reflect different segments of nature, so it is disparate aspects of life that are caught in an epic or a sonnet. If we were to examine the fluctuations of the sonnet through the centuries, we should discover, aside from changes of a merely technical order, the changing fashions in love, for the sonnet is principally the mouthpiece of the lover; if we were to conduct a survey of the epic, we should be able to observe the changing standards of heroism and chivalry and martial magnificence. Characteristically, with the mechanization and consequent prosaism of war, the epic has become that rather more prosy thing, the novel; and with the decline of codified or ritualized amatory exultation, the sonnet has had either to switch uneasily to other subjects, or undergo a decline and waste away as--and because--no lover nowadays does. (It is true, to be sure, that one century in the life of the epic or sonnet would be but as a day; in our time, however, when inexpensive mass production of books and magazines has speeded up the life of poetry commensurately with life in general, a hundred years in the life of the prose poem represent the better part

of its life span. The models of the Carthaginian elephant, or even of the mediaeval battering ram, probably changed very little from decade to decade compared to the transformations of the modern airplane.) Now the prose poem, because it is the freest of all poetic forms, is particularly suited to the pouring out of the poet's unconscious, and, in one sense, then, the development of the prose poem mirrors a growing exploration of the individual and, by extension, collective unconscious, which this genre is free to render in its primary, unrefined state. But there are those poets who see in the removal of formal strictures a correspondingly greater obligation to the essence of the poetic (whatever that may be) and who feel that carefully wrought poeticism alone can compensate for the emancipation from traditional poetics. It follows that the prose poem becomes, paradoxically, a journey both to the beginnings of the ego, and to the ultimate in artistic refinement.

Which raises the question: what is a prose poem, or poem in prose? It is something written without rhyme, verse division, or meter, that is nonetheless poetry and not prose. But how do we know that a short passage, though printed from one edge of the paper to the other and with no specially wide margins or peculiar indentations, is in fact a poem in prose, and not just a prose fragment? To answer this fully and unexceptionably, we should have to know exactly how to define poetry and how to define prose. But what is prose? Is it something that--as some of us joyously discover one fine day--we have been speaking all our lives; or is it something

that--as others among us discover--we have never in all our lives been able to write, let alone speak, successfully? And what is poetry? The best words in the best order? Best order for what? Best words on what scale?

No, there is no absolute definition of prose or poetry, and hence, it is greatly to be feared, no foolproof definition of a poem in prose. But we can visualize prose and poetry as being at war with each other, raiding and encroaching upon each other, stealing each other's weapons, trying to appropriate each other's territories. Between such combatants one may well expect a no man's land. A no man's land full of smoke and barbed wire, danger and confusion. If one ventures into this area from the direction of prose, one comes upon something called poetic prose; if from the direction of poetry, upon the prose poem. Where these advance guards operate, some of the least known terrains are explored, some of the most significant skirmishes fought.

Could it be, then, that a study of prose poetry may provide certain insights also into the nature of prose and poetry?

What is a Prose Poem?

Let us proceed as scientists would, from a hypothesis. We shall start this critical inquiry with a theoretical definition which may in the end be borne out, or much modified, or even wholly transformed. But by that time the theory will have yielded a valid concept if not, indeed, an incontrovertible definition.

Since the question "prose poem" raises the prior questions "prose" and "poetry," the poem in prose cannot be pinned down and tagged so easily as, say, the sonnet, ballad, or even epigram. But, for the purpose of our hypothesis, the prose poem is describable as follows.

Aim: to achieve all or more than all of the effects of a formal poem, without, however, using rhyme, meter, or verse division of the sort found even in vers libre.

Means: rhythm, imagery, concentration, and a willing suspension of belief in the raisonné element that characterizes most prose and much poetry.

Scope: brief. For a form of poetry that leans so heavily on prose cannot afford to expropriate it of its most characteristic hallmark, length, without itself becoming prose. While there is no such thing as a long prose lyric, then, there may be room for, when the length becomes downright heroic, a prose epic, i.e. an epic prose poem. Such is, presumably, Les Chants de Maldoror, and, very possibly, Hölderlin's Hyperion. And as such they will come in for their share of attention. Yet we need not treat them in full detail: a prose epic, after all, is a novel, and, indeed, our concept of the novel has become flexible and catholic enough to embrace the magna opera of both a Hölderlin and a Lautréamont.

Now there is one more criterion which we should agree upon as a corollary, arbitrary though it may seem at first glance. Namely, that a prose poem, to be such in the fullest sense, must have been

consciously intended as such by its author. And could one not have written a poem in prose unconsciously, without knowing what one was doing? No, because a poem in prose is not a discovery: it is an invention, an artifact. One can discover America accidentally and without knowing what it is (but, we might ask, is it then America?); one can compose a tone poem or write a poem in prose only inasmuch as one has an idea of such a thing in one's head, or a model by which to go. Other things may be more or less close relations of the prose poem and may be, even if poor relations, worthy of consideration, but full study can be accorded only the prose poem proper which goes by that name, and stands or falls by it. It is, of course, possible that an author, while clearly having the concept of a prose poem in his mind, did not also have in mind the would-be student of the prose poem, and so, very inconsiderately, neglected to label his piece explicitly as prose poem. But where it can be reasonably demonstrated that this uncoöperative personage knew what he was writing (though not what he was doing!), we shall reserve the right of supplying the missing label. Just as, for that matter, we may exclude an avowed prose poet who fails to meet our standards or expectations. After all, this is to be a critical survey, not a catalogue.

The Question of Prose Rhythm

In a work such as this, one may expect to find some systematic study of prose rhythms. This is a field of inquiry which is be-

coming more and more fashionable. I do not, however, propose to get involved in any programmatic investigation of this sort--for the following reasons.

The study of prose rhythm proceeds by analogy to the study of rhythms in verse, i.e. metrics. In verse, when we inquire into the metrics of a poet, we examine the kind of meters he chooses, and how regularly he abides by his chosen meters. In a poem in iambic pentameter, for example, we study to what extent the poet's verse abides by that metrical norm and to what extent it departs from it, and what reasons, besides the need for variety, there may be for the departures. Basically, then, poetic rhythm is the tension, the interaction between the underlying metric norm and the independent idiosyncracies of the individual verse or stanza. Or, otherwise expressed, the counterpoint between the metrical archetype felt by the inner ear, and the actual verse as it is heard.

Now the difficulty of establishing an equivalent system for prose lies, clearly, in the absence from it of any distinct normative principle. We may reject as fanciful, misguided, and even absurd, some of the attempts at positing such a principle. Here must first be mentioned the physiological, chronometric, and musicological heresies. These are closely related, and consist of such laboratory procedures as measuring, in oral renditions of prose passages by successive speakers, total duration, length of pauses, number of heartbeats, pitch, sound waves, etc. with kymographs, cathode-ray oscillographs, parabolas and epicycles, statistical charts, mathe-

mathematical formulae, musical notations, and other such paraphernalia. If scientists wish to waste their time thus, if pseudo-scientists, unable to perform more fruitful investigations, invent and practice this quasi-science, they are welcome to do so--as long as they do not pretend to further literary criticism and understanding. For what are we to do with discussions such as this:

From a study of the anatomy of the organs of speech, and of certain curves, [Jeaffreson] concludes that stress corresponds with the maximum lowering of the jaw, that is to say, it occurs somewhere about the middle of the vowel. If the movements of the jaw are recorded, a curve is obtained, showing a series of troughs which are deepest, everything else being equal, for stressed vowels. Mainly from this fact, Jeaffreson feels entitled to conclude that the movements of the jaw are a true index of the nature and place of stress in the syllable. A criticism forces itself on the reader at first glance: stress is normally conceived as a point of maximum effort; is it not strange that this should be concomitant with that phase of the articulation where the speed of the movement is nil, viz. when the jaw has reached its lowest level and is about to go up again?¹

So writes André Classe, and we feel that the jaw is not the only thing that has reached its lowest level. Classe's book, sedulous and scientific, is a veritable treasury of humor for anyone concerned with prose as literature. Now, to be sure, Mr. Classe disclaims being a literary critic (p. 135); in which case why all this hocus-pocus, and where, if you please, does his research into the "Rhythm of English Prose" belong? In a class by itself, no doubt.² The literary critic is apt to give this approach short shrift; as one German poet-critic puts it, "Das Fallen und Steigen der Sätze und die Wirkung, die sie im Fortgang aufeinander üben, ist durch Zeitaessverfahren nicht zu errechnen."³

The only rhythmic criteria that appear applicable to prose with some justification are those based on subdividing a passage into intervals of one sort or another, counting of syllables and stresses in such intervals, and abstracting, if possible, some kind of pattern from this. But the problems are overwhelming. They can be subdivided into those of the scholar (here turned taxonomer), the reciter (or 'reader aloud'--it will surely be conceded that without the presupposition of reading aloud the whole question of rhythms is nearly meaningless), the listener, and the writer.

From the point of view of the scholar there is, to begin with, the question of subdividing. There must be sections of some kind--corresponding to bars in music, verses in poetry--if a prose passage is to be analyzed for rhythms. The sections would naturally occur between pauses. But where are these? At the ends of sentences, clauses, and phrases--generally speaking, but not without exception. And, of course, there are sectional groupings irrespective of syntax. One may, for instance, postulate intervals between two rhyming words embedded in the prose, or between types of repetition of words having nothing to do with syntax. Furthermore, some pauses may be so slight that it becomes disputable whether they should be treated as pauses at all. But let us assume that the scholar accomplishes a transcription of the prose text as free verse and is ready to analyze. He would next count the number of syllables and of stresses (ictus).

The number of syllables is determinable empirically with a small margin for disagreement, but the number of stresses is a much