A Tradition of Subversion

The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery

MARGUERITTE S. MURPHY

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To Brian

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Mon cher ami, je vous envoie un petit ouvrage dont on ne pourrait pas dire, sans injustice, qu'il n'a ni queue ni tête, puisque tout, au contraire y est à la fois tête et queue, alternativement et réciproquement. Considérez, je vous prie, quelles admirables commodités cette combinaison nous offre à tous, à vous, à moi et au lecteur. Nous pouvons couper où nous voulons, moi ma rêverie, vous le manuscrit, le lecteur sa lecture; car je ne suspends pas la volonté rétive de celui-ci au fil interminable d'une intrigue superflue.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE,

Dedication to Arsène Houssaye, Petits poèmes en prose (1862)

(My dear friend, I send you a little work of which one couldn't say, without injustice, that it has neither tail nor head, since all of it, on the contrary is at once head and tail, alternatively and reciprocally. Consider, I ask you, what an admirable convenience this combination offers us all, you, me, and the reader. We can "cut" wherever we like, I my reveries, you the manuscript, the reader his reading; because I do not hang the latter's restive will on the interminable thread of a superfluous plot.)

In nineteenth-century France, there arose a poetic genre that seemed, by definition, to take poetry as far beyond its conventional boundaries as possible. This genre, the prose poem, was a genre formed in violation of genre, a seeming hybrid, in name a contradiction in terms. The first important exponent and practitioner of the prose poem was Charles Baudelaire, although he acknowledges Aloysius Bertrand's Gaspard de la Nuit (1842) as the "mystérieux et brillant modèle" for his own collection, Petits poèmes en prose. Baudelaire's

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

prose poems awakened interest in the new genre and, in effect, engendered a new poetic tradition. In the next generation of poets, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Lautréamont, among others, would take the form in new directions, revolutionary even for this genre of revolt. That quintessential, albeit fictional aesthete, Huysmans's Des Esseintes, would deem the prose poem "the concrete juice, the osmazome of literature, the essential oil of art." Today in France, a poem is as likely to be written in prose as in verse.²

This study focuses on a secondary and initially derivative tradition: the prose poem in English and American poetry. Here we find a much more sporadic history than in France. In the period of high modernism, when that other French form, vers libre, was heartily embraced, the prose poem remained marginal, experimental, a minor genre for most major poets and critics. Why was this? How was the configuration of the prose poem so alien as to retard its development in Anglo-American poetry at a time of fierce interest in French poets and movements? And what form did the prose poem take in Anglo-American poetry when it did appear? To address such questions, we must consider the function served by the prose poem-social and ideological as well as aesthetic—and evolving definitions and perceptions of the genre as they affect its reception. How might a poetic genre be instrumental in the processes of social, political, and literary history? And how might history itself impinge on the development of a poetic form? My approach will consider the possibilities and constraints of the form qua form as basic, then move on to examine the ideological "content" of the form, and how its "message" or sociopolitical configuration develops in the course of a century or so in a foreign tradition. This study, then, has two purposes that are related: first, to offer a model for reading prose poems irrespective of language or national literature. This model should be as applicable to recent American experiments in the genre as it is to nineteenthcentury French prose poems. The second aim is to account for the Anglo-American tradition—to explain, to some degree, a problematic literary history by focusing both on prominent examples of the genre and on moments of impasse within that history.

From the start, the prose poem was allied with an aesthetic

that valued shock and innovation over tradition and convention. It emerged, within the history of French poetry, as a reaction to the rigid prosodic strictures and artless "versificateurs" of eighteenthcentury neoclassicism in France. But its revolutionary gesture does not cease with the rejection of prosody and lineation. As I will argue, the prose poem is an inherently subversive genre as well as a historically subversive one. Because of its marginality, its situation on the "borderline of prose" (T. S. Eliot's phrase), it must continually subvert prosaic conventions in order to establish itself as authentically "other." I see this necessity to subvert not just the conventions of verse, but also of prose as a basic distinguishing feature of the genre, which has few, if any, conventions of its own. Moreover, each prose poem must suggest a traditional prose genre to some extent in order to subvert it. The prose poem, then, may be seen as a battlefield where conventional prose of some sort appears and is defeated by the text's drive to innovate and to differentiate itself, to construct a selfdefining "poeticity" (a term in itself problematized by the prose poem). While every text may to some extent alter its own genre, the prose poem draws in and alters other genres or modes of discourse as part of its own peculiar self-definition. Furthermore, the suggestion of a traditional genre of discourse often lends authority to the "new" prose, despite the eventual subversion through defeat of convention and/or semantic dysfunctioning. The prose poem, then, is of special interest as a genre in which the traditional and the new are brought continually and inevitably into conflict, a conflict in which presumably every literary text participates, but which is here intensified and foregrounded.

The spectrum of conventional prose present in and defeated by the prose poem is broad; in theory, no genre of prosaic discourse is inimical to the prose poem, although some tend to dominate. Two recent books also approach the prose poem from the side of prose: Richard Terdiman's Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France and Jonathan Monroe's A Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre.³ Like Terdiman and Monroe, I will rely on Mikhail Bakhtin's studies of the novel in exploring the prose poem as a "dialogical" genre, but

will especially emphasize the "heteroglossia" found in the prose poem in my model and in my individual readings. Unlike Terdiman's and Monroe's, my version of Bakhtin is not a specifically Marxist one; that is, I don't view Bakhtinian dialogics as another version of the Marxist or Hegelian dialectic. In fact, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson make a compelling argument that adherence to any synthetic system-Marxist, formalist, or semiotic-is anathema to Bakhtin's overall project, and that the "sincerely" Marxist books, written by V. N. Voloshinov and P. N. Medvedev, but attributed to Bakhtin by some scholars, actually "are highly sophisticated monologizations of Bakhtin's thought." So I will attempt to "read" the prose poem within a poetics borrowed from Bakhtin that is sensitive to the sociopolitical nature of language, yet "open" to the various political and social agendas reflected in that language, without an overarching political teleology. My "politics" will be restricted to textual battles for the most part—subversions of social order and hierarchy through subversions of genre. (I will deviate from this restriction to intratextual politics when turning to the extratextual, or at least, extraliterary conflict that surrounded the Wilde trials, which had such a devastating effect on literature and the literati of the time.)

In many ways, the prose poem asks for such a focus on intratextual conflict. For while the form by its very name suggests the distinction between literary and nonliterary language ("poetic" prose is necessarily literary), this amorphous genre has been and continues to be a vehicle for the introduction of nonliterary prose into "poetic" discourse—the prose of the street, the pulpit, the newsrooms, the political arena, the psychiatrist's office, and so on. The "conflict," then, between literature and "life," or literary language and extraliterary discourses, is brought within the text and is part of its peculiar dynamic. As a result, the range of diction appearing in the prose poem is potentially as broad as that of the language itself.

As these comments suggest, the prose poem has a capacity for subversion beyond purely formal considerations. What was the ideological function of the prose poem at its inception, especially in the hands of Baudelaire, the first great popularizer of the genre? How did this function evolve in the second half of the nineteenth century in

France? Terdiman and Monroe both make powerful arguments for the prose poem as a "counter-discourse" to the dominant discourses of nineteenth-century France. Terdiman explains:

At just the historical moment when the term "prosaic" was mutating into a pejorative, the prose poem sought to reevaluate the expressive possibilities, and the social functionality, of prose itself. Nothing in the second half of the century situates this institution more acutely, nor puts it into crisis more decisively, than its reinscription in the project of the *poème en prose*. From this perspective, the reflection on the discursive which the prose poem constituted by problematizing the entire realm of discourse appears as a sophisticated—and deeply subversive—scrutiny of its mechanisms of control, and of their points of potential fracture.⁵

What happened, then, to the prose poem when it traveled across the English Channel, and across the Atlantic toward the end of the century? Did it retain its subversive character, and if so, what were its objects? And did it attain any discursive power? There was a certain vogue for the genre during the *fin de siècle*, but it fell out of fashion not long after it appeared, only to resurface in the second decade of the next century. Yet the prose poem did not flourish at this time either; only in the United States in the 1960s do we find extensive use of the genre by poets writing in English. Why was it not a greater part of Anglo-American modernism, given the prominence of related experiments in fiction, the novels of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce as the most obvious examples? I will address such questions of absence, however partially, in chapter 1.

There has been a tendency among critics and poets to distinguish between experimental poetic prose in America and the prose poem as established in France. Both William Carlos Williams and John Ashbery have unambiguously rejected the rubric of "prose poem" in the French sense for their works. My choice to use that term and my argument of continuity may, then, seem ill-advised and ill-fated. Indeed, Stephen Fredman, in a lucid study of the American prose poem that emphasizes its roots in the Emersonian tradition of oratory and meditation, chooses to discard the term *prose poem* altogether for

such texts, as "it is an oxymoron aimed at defamiliarizing lyric poetry, and it remains redolent with the atmospheric sentiment of French Symbolism."6 I would instead investigate what lies behind such rejections of the rubric "prose poem," exploring why the symboliste beginnings have taken on a certain taint, and argue that the American prose poem, which exploiting the flexibility of English syntax and the vitality of American speech, has nonetheless remained true to the innovative, expansive, and subversive course set by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and others. I feel we would misconstrue the nature and spirit of this "open" and "dangerous" form (Baudelaire) to presume that the sort of discursive experimentation achieved by American poets such as Gertrude Stein and Ashbery goes beyond the parameters of what the prose poem can or should do. In a way, this French form seems to fall prey to an isolationist aesthetic that American poetry would construct to lay claim to its own turf as an independent and "new" tradition. Yet, given the counterexample of vers libre, a French form that found widespread acceptance in American poetry, I feel that the reified view of the prose poem as a remnant of aestheticism was more lethal to its use by American poets, although the genre did form part of aestheticism's own defense against the utilitarian and "anti-art" tendencies of the middle class in Victorian England. Such representations of the prose poem as decorative and self-involved prose camouflage the genre's essentially subversive character, the force of its counter-discourse, important even (or especially) in the era of British Decadence.

This study does not attempt to document the development of the Anglo-American prose poem extensively, but rather focuses on texts that represent, to my mind, important trends for the genre and reflect on motives for discontinuity in the tradition. Chapter 1, basically historical in nature, surveys the period of transfer, when the French prose poem was first introduced to the English and American reading public by the fin-de-siècle generation. At the time, the gesture to write prose poems was both scandalously "French" and flagrantly anticanonical, representing an association with the French avantgarde. This interest in the genre among the Decadents, however, tended to taint it for subsequent generations of poets, resulting in an

early, yet significant discontinuity in the tradition. The young T. S. Eliot, for instance, reacted aversely to the prose poem as a tainted form, although he himself wrote some prose poems. This desire to avoid the whiff of Decadence has social and political grounds beyond the simple facts of literary vogue.

My second chapter outlines my interpretive model for the prose poem, suggesting links between formal and ideological questions. While the prose poem remained a minor and marginal genre, some important experimental prose poems did emerge during the period of high modernism. In chapters 3 and 4, I discuss William Carlos Williams's Kora in Hell: Improvisations (1920) and Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons (1914) as texts that demonstrate some subversive possibilities for the form. Williams's Kora in Hell: Improvisations is an adamantly American experiment, attempting a new "improvisational" form, with fragmentation and disjunction at the base of its aesthetic, which brings a variety of American voices into poetry through the "democracy" of prose. Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons is an even more radical experiment: prose pieces juggle syntactic units into near nonsense while superficially masquerading as the simple prose of the enclosed world that stylish women inhabit. While disrupting fundamental syntax and semantics, Stein introduces a lesbian subtext beneath the proper accents of feminine prose. I then turn to John Ashbery's Three Poems (1972) in chapter 5 as a contemporary revision of the genre. Ashbery exploits different sorts of prosaic discourse—philosophical or meditative prose—and expands the genre quite literally by writing long prose poems, thereby belying one of the most common truisms found in "definitions" of the prose poem: brevity.7 Ashbery also expands Williams's "democracy" of voices into a fluent "polyphony" of discursive types, high and low.

I have chosen to focus on examples of the genre that demonstrate its potential to be radical and experimental—to postulate itself as unknowing of its own textual future. These more radical texts make apparent the prose poem's characteristic amorphousness, its suspect heterogeneity, that accounts in part for its marginality and frequent difficulty. Evidence of this amorphousness appears as well in the extreme and often paradoxical terms used to describe the prose poem:

"the osmazome of literature, the essential oil of art" (Huysmans); "an Icarian art" (Suzanne Bernard); "the literary genre with an oxymoron for a name" (Michael Riffaterre); "absolute counter-discourse" (Terdiman); "a genre that does not want to be itself" (Monroe). Neater definitions of the genre have appeared, too, limiting the prose poem to brief, self-enclosed, self-thematized examples. Yet, as I will argue in chapter 2, such definitions reflect organicist notions of art and poetry that inevitably reduce the genre to its "cleanest lines," masking its conflictual and open aesthetic. I will suggest a "postmodern" version of the prose poem that is, perhaps, better suited to such an open and subversive aesthetic, at least in our time.

What are the broader implications of this problematic genre? The prose poem offers a "test case" for how genres develop historically and formally. As a very new genre, and one curiously allied with the tendency toward dissolution of genre, the prose poem seems to start with a fresh field, a literary tabula rasa—utter rejection of lineation. which was a sine qua non of poetry until the prose poem's appearance. But, of course, there is no literary tabula rasa; the decision to write poetry in the form of prose puts the poetic discourse immediately in tension with conventional prose discourse and genres. In one sense, my approach is a conservative one, as I examine how a consciously experimental form is affected and infected by traditional forms, how the most successful prose poems use and deform entrenched discursive modes, conventions, and genres. Every "new" genre is formed from previously existing ones, according to Tzvetan Todorov.8 The prose poem, with its initially nihilistic gesture toward tradition and convention, shows how the struggle with tradition and convention is necessarily an ongoing one. Yet the necessity, urgency, and intimacy of this struggle in the case of the prose poem suggest the relevance of its history and aesthetics to questions that confront literary studies now—questions about the struggle of marginal texts, forms, and voices against the literary, social, or political status quo.



The Prose Poem as a Decadent Genre

The letter written from Torquay was intended to be a kind of prose poem in answer to a poem Lord Alfred had written to me in verse. It was written under circumstances of great feeling.

OSCAR WILDE in court (1895)

It is noticeable that poetry which looks like prose, and prose which sounds like poetry, are assured of a certain degree of odium and success. Why should this be so?

T. S. ELIOT, "The Borderline of Prose" (1917)

In England, writers had begun to question the boundary between poetry and prose long before the arrival of the French prose poem on the literary scene. Wordsworth, in his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," argues against essentialist distinctions between the language of prose and poetic language in defending the use of prosaic diction in poetry: "It may be safely affirmed, that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." More than eight decades later, Walter Pater invokes Wordsworth's preface as support for the appreciation of certain qualities in prose more conventionally sought in poetry:

Dismissing then, under the sanction of Wordsworth, that harsher opposition of poetry to prose, as savouring in fact of the arbitrary psychology of the last century, and with it the prejudice that there can be but one only beauty of prose style, I propose here to point out certain qualities of all literature as a fine art, which, if they apply to the literature of fact, apply still more to the literature of the imagina-

tive sense of fact, while they apply indifferently to verse and prose, so far as either is really imaginative.

In this essay on "Style," Pater claims for "imaginative prose" a singular importance as "the special and opportune art of the modern world" being a world of "chaotic variety and complexity" and one pervaded by "naturalism, a curiosity about everything whatever as it really is, involving a certain humility of attitude, cognate to what must, after all, be the less ambitious form of literature." The variety possible in prose, its heterogeneous capabilities, allows it to reflect more accurately the complexity of modern experience. Pater describes such prose as "an instrument of many stops, meditative, observant, descriptive, eloquent, analytic, plaintive, fervid. Its beauties will be not exclusively 'pedestrian': it will exert, in due measure, all the varied charms of poetry, down to the rhythm which, as in Cicero, or Michelet, or Newman, at their best, gives its musical value to every syllable."2 While Pater recognizes that prose and verse have different potentials for expression, he argues for an evaluation of prose according to certain "poetic" norms, treating prose as "a fine art" like verse.

Wordsworth's aim—to promote the prosaic in poetry—may seem to oppose Pater's, to appreciate the "poetry" in prose, yet both clearly exemplify the continued reevaluation of the nature of poetry and the poetic in the nineteenth century. With aestheticism in the 1880s, this blurring of generic distinctions coincides with the reappraisal of what art is in itself, indeed the assertion that life can be art just as the prosaic may exist in verse, and the poetic in prose. Furthermore, art becomes a dominant subject for art, from the descriptions of works of art in Théophile Gautier's Mademoiselle de Maupin to the maleficent chef d'oeuvre of The Picture of Dorian Gray. It becomes fashionable to borrow terms from one art form when discussing another, to divine colors in music, symphonies in poems, poetry in painting, and musical phrases in prose. The critic becomes an artist, as in the title of Wilde's essay, for his role is not merely to describe the art object, or define what is beauty, but to replicate the aesthetic experience in his prose, "transforming each art into literature." Accordingly, even critical prose may be aesthetically valued, an artistic text like any other. "Art" would subsume "life."

These tenets of aestheticism would seem to open a fertile field for the introduction of the prose poem in the nineties, and indeed, prose poems by Decadent writers do appear. The form was clearly French, and prose poems by Aloysius Bertrand, Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and others now less known, like Pierre Louÿs and Henri de Régnier, served as important models. Yet the artistic prose of aesthetic criticism offered a prominent indigenous prototype. Prose had assumed aesthetic value in and of itself, and was considered no longer a transparent conduit to thought, as Pater argues in "Style." Beyond the valorization of prose for itself, or for its style, the exchange of terminology among art forms and endless analogies between different media offered a vocabulary for describing prose poems—a poetry lacking rhyme, meter, or stanza form—as, for instance, painted tableaux, or musical compositions. Indeed, the first major anthology of French prose poems translated into English was entitled Pastels in Prose. Finally, if life, lived with style, may be considered art, and prose more conducive to representing the complexities, chaos, and plurality of modern life, so the prose poem may seem a particularly apt vehicle for transcriptions of the experience of modernity. Indeed, Pater's remarks on prose are reminiscent of Baudelaire's aims for his prose poems in his "Dédicace à Arsène Houssaye" (1862) of the Petits poèmes en prose. He wanted a procedure to represent the modern,

d'appliquer à la description de la vie moderne, ou plutôt d'une vie moderne et plus abstraite, le procédé qu'il [Aloysius Bertrand] avait appliqué à la peinture de la vie ancienne, si étrangement pittoresque.⁴

(to apply to the description of modern life, or rather of a modern and more abstract life, the process that he had applied to the painting of ancient life, so strangely picturesque.)

This chapter will explore the *fin-de-siècle* interest in the prose poem, but will also attempt to account for the abortive nature of this early interest in the imported genre. LeRoy C. Breunig comments on