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Stephen Fredman's *Poet's Prose:* *The Crisis In American Verse* Michael Delville

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- Stephen Fredman, *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Jonathan Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987.
- Marguerite S. Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem from Wilde to Ashbery*. Amherst, Mass.: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.

For decades, the prose poem has variously delighted, confounded and incensed readers and critics. Until recent years, it has been confined to the margins of literary history as a rather disturbing and elusive oddity, and there has been little in the way of a serious and informed attempt to define or understand the form, especially in the context of the contemporary landscape of Anglo-American literature.

All this is changing. The prose poem, which has long been neglected and underrepresented in mainstream and experimental publications alike, is growing in popularity in the world of American poetry. It is more widely available than ever before, thanks to the joint efforts of an ever increasing number of imaginative writers, publishers and editors. This renewal of interest in the form has led to the publication of several important anthologies and numberless collections from both major and small press publishers. Further, general interest has reawakened more scholarly interest and several substantive studies have seen the light since Stephen Fredman's groundbreaking *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse* (1983; revised ed. 1990), the first critical book devoted exclusively to American prose poetry. Focusing on William Carlos Williams' *Kora in Hell*, Robert Creeley's *Presences: A Text for Marisol* and John Ashbery's *Three Poems*, Fredman's study explains why certain contemporary American poets have decided to write in prose in order to escape from the claustrophobic enclosures of traditional genre boundaries and reclaim for poetry a number of modes and registers usually considered to be the private ground of prose. The real focus of *Poet's Prose*, however, is on the ways these poets have reacted to the tendency of modern poetry to question itself and turn back upon its own medium: form and language. Fredman's description of the ensuing sense of "crisis" that characterizes contemporary American poetry points back to Mallarmé's famous essay, "Crise de vers," which states that poetic language itself—and not the subjectivist space of the lyric—should become the main object of investigation of modern poets. In an American perspective, *Poet's Prose* stresses the centrality of Emerson's essays to the emergence of self-dramatizing, self-aware and self-questioning prose works that reassert the primacy of the act of composition and often seek to apprehend "how things arise from the matrix of language" (xiv). Fredman then proceeds to examine how the Emersonian tradition of oratorical and meditative prose evolved into what he himself calls "poet's prose" (a term applied to "works that are conceived of and read as extensions of poetry rather than as contributions to one of the existing prose genres"), avoiding the term "prose

poem” which, according to the author, “remains redolent with the atmospheric sentiment of French Symbolism” (xiii).

These terminological considerations aside, one of the main strengths of Fredman’s book lies in its superb close-readings as well as in its willingness to address a wide range of issues that are central not only to the aesthetics of prose poetry but also to our understanding of the current theoretical debates about language, textuality and the analysis of modes of discourse. While the opening chapter of the book considers William’s “organic prose style” (52) in the light of Emerson’s notion of the *panharmonicon*, Fredman’s wonderful discussion of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Heidegger in chapter two introduces us to a line of thought that straddles the divide of creative and critical, literary and philosophical composition. These writers, Fredman convincingly argues, provide us with a key to a fuller understanding of Creeley’s “poetics of conjecture” (to use Charles Altieri’s expression), one whose aim is to convey a sense of “thinking gauging itself” (62) and thereby achieve what Creeley himself describes as “a condition of speculative wonder or curiosity” (64).

On a formal and structural level, having the sentence rather than the verse line as the basic compositional unit of “poet’s prose” enables the poet to indulge in an endless series of narrative and speculative digressions that “[re-sist] the gravitational pull of the complete thought” at the same time as they preempt the possibility of poetic closure. Here, as elsewhere, Fredman’s notion of the “generative sentence,” where “grammar leads the writing through a succession of ideas” (57), directly echoes the Baudelairian project to reproduce the actual movement of thought, “the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience.” As for Ashbery’s “translative prose” (101) in *Three Poems* (which aims at the Mallarméan ideal of poetry as “pure” language), it is clearly in line with recent definitions of the prose poem as an organic, paratactic chain of forms and ideas—a principle central to Donald Wesling’s “narrative of grammar” and Ron Silliman’s “New Sentence,” among other examples.

For the most part *Poet’s Prose* marks itself by a rigorous examination of poetic form, where and in what configurations the aesthetic options of the poet manifest themselves, and in what way these compositional strategies can be traced to precursors as diverse as Rimbaud’s *A Season in Hell*, Emerson’s essays, Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* or even Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. Nonetheless, and despite the diversity of approaches represented in the book, one senses that Fredman quite justifiably has a fondness for certain more experimental “trends” of the contemporary prose poem to the exclusion of others that may prove less innovative so far as form and rhetoric are concerned. Although it is entirely consistent with the book’s methodological premises, his decision to devote the major part of his book to only three “occasional” prose poets who write primarily in verse would seem to reinforce the idea that the prose poem, however subversive and antagonistic it may be, is somehow a marginal phenomenon whose influence can only be felt briefly and sporadically in the works of a few prominent writers. Given the significant amount of

controversy that has surrounded the genre since its inception in nineteenth century France, we might expect Fredman's prose poetry canon to further consolidate the genre's reputation as the illegitimate by-product of a larger, more established tradition or, at worst (as is the case with Bly, Edson, Merwin, Ignatow and other "followers . . . of Baudelaire and Rimbaud" [11]), as the American derivative of the French Symbolist and Surrealist prose poem.

Be that as it may, Fredman cannot stand accused of camouflaging the strategies that determine his choice of texts. His emphasis tends to be mainly on works that evidence a "philosophical and critical" (xiii) bent rather than on writers who, by and large, build upon the tradition of the French prose poem, "consisting usually of short units that tell a story, a parable, or isolate a timeless moment through descriptive or narrative means" (11). At times, however, Fredman's overall insistence on separating American "poet's prose" from the "generic" (54), European-inspired prose poem leads him to overgeneralize about the latter's alleged practitioners. His contention that Robert Bly's "sentimental" poem, "The Dead Seal near McClure's Beach," "stands squarely in the tradition of Aloysius Bertrand's imaginary Flemish paintings in *Gaspard de la nuit* (1842) and Baudelaire's fantasies of the city" (55)—with no mention of the significantly more crucial influences of, say, Thoreau, Rilke and Ponge on Bly's prose poems—seems reductive and unduly dismissive ("for both Bly and Baudelaire," Fredman writes, "the emotions in the poems have congealed into attitudes that the prose merely sets forth").

At the other end of the "mainstream vs. innovative" spectrum, Fredman's ongoing concern with "the absolutely constitutive role language plays in the world" (xiv) allies him with the Language poets, for whom the prose poem has to move beyond the lyric and is first and foremost a leading agent in a process of redefinition of the very goals and methods of poetry. The second edition of *Poet's Prose* contains a short additional section devoted to the "talk prose" of David Antin (aptly described as "a brilliant cross between Socrates, Wittgenstein and Lenny Bruce" [137]) as well as to the work of three poets associated with the Language poetry scene: David Bromige, Ron Silliman and Michael Davidson. For these writers, Gertrude Stein, "the writer in English with the deepest interest in language, the only one interested in language as language," undoubtedly remains the preeminent mentor. Stein's commitment to "the problematic double system of language" (142), her tendency to reflect upon the gap between signifier and signified and investigate the "hardware" of poetic language, is indeed the keystone of what Language poet Michael Davidson has called the "prose of fact:" "a point of conjecture" (viii) around which the Language poets seek to investigate the problem of linguistic mediation—the ways the materiality of language itself should be addressed in relation to how the poet writes and thinks about the external world. Here, also, Fredman's "poet's prose" is clearly in line with some of the more recent developments of the genre—most notably by a number of Language poets whose interest in ideology, language and power is reflected in works that seek to downplay the author's personal voice and question the assumptions underlying the well-

made “workshop poem,” with its normative rhetoric and uncomplicated representations of the self.

Despite his self-confessed bias towards a certain form of highly self-conscious and essentially non-lyric (or post-lyric) prose poetry, Fredman never lets his choice of focus become so oppressive as to cancel the many benefits and pleasures of reading what remains one of the most lucid and ambitious studies in American literature of the last twenty years.

Anyone interested in an international and comparative approach to prose poetry will turn to Jonathan Monroe’s *A Poverty of Objects*, another excellent example of a kind of literary history that combines the study of individual writers with an awareness of the socio-cultural context in which they wrote. The thesis of this carefully documented book is that the prose poem operates as “a critical, self-critical, utopian genre, a genre that tests the limits of genre” (16) and “aspires to be poetic/literary language’s own coming to self-consciousness, the place where poet and reader alike become critically aware of the writer’s language” (35-36). With this question of the inherently deviant and self-referential nature of the genre as a prelude, *A Poverty of Objects* draws upon Bakhtin’s theories on the novel and proceeds to emphasize the prose poem’s “heteroglossia”: its refusal to develop itself along the line of the poet’s personal voice and its willingness to accommodate a multiplicity of voices representing “various speech types in conflict with one another” (33). Examples of such “heteroglossic” possibilities for the genre include Baudelaire’s “dialogues between men and women and rich and poor,” “the intersection of religious, economic, scientific, pagan, political, historical, and other modes of discourse” in Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, Jacob’s “condensed Cubist parodies of the popular novel,” the “rhetoric of objects” at work in Ponge’s *proèmes*, and Stein’s “intermingling of the languages of method, conversation, domestic life, dinner parties, sex, violence, and detective stories” (33).

By allowing different linguistic and social registers to combine and to compete within a single poetic space, the prose poem, Monroe speculates, rejects poetry’s “dream of itself as a pure other set apart in sublime isolation” (19) and is therefore in a position to focus on “unresolved contradictions and problems of everyday life, the world of prose in which we live and breathe” (32). It enacts a symbolic confrontation of ideological conflicts which every historical period necessarily maintains, sometimes in contradiction to its own self-proclaimed homogeneity. In final analysis, the prose poem—far from fusing its hybrid poetics into a single, unified whole—becomes a writing practice that integrates a network of public and personal voices into a complex poetic idiom that allows each of them to be heard.

The first part of *A Poverty of Objects* traces back the origins of the prose poem to the German Romantics. In the opening chapter, Monroe’s historical overview of the genre becomes the occasion for a sustained meditation on Schlegel’s theory of a progressive *Universalpoesie* which anticipates the “fusion” of genres articulated by the prose poem. After considering Novalis’

Hymnen an die Nacht as symptomatic of the formal and thematic struggle between the poetic and the prosaic, Monroe then examines pivotal texts in the history of the genre, from Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen* and Rimbaud's *Illuminations* to Francis Ponge's *Le Grand Recueil*, Robert Bly's *The Morning Glory* and Helga Novak's *Geselliges Beisammensein*.

One of my favorite chapters in Monroe's study is the one on Max Jacob in which the author attempts to define the process whereby the prose poems of *Le Cornet à dés* subvert or parody a variety of literary genres by encapsulating what Bakhtin calls the "conventionality of their forms and their language" into a vocabulary of their own. Dialectics is a favored method used by Monroe in his examination of the hybrid dynamics of what Michael Riffaterre has described as "the literary genre with an oxymoron for a name." Unlike Riffaterre, however, for whom the text's relation to a selected "intertext" as the single, invariant constitutive feature of the genre, Monroe's Marxist interpretation of the genre concentrates on its capacity for "self-critique and self-parody" (162) and identifies the ideological options that stand behind aesthetic choices. His discussion of *Une Saison en enfer*, for example, underlines the conflict between the religious and the secular, as well as between the pastoral and the urban, that manifests itself in Rimbaud's poetic-prosaic experiments. In my opinion, the chapters devoted to Bloch and Ponge are the most successful in that they reveal the political, utopian narratives that underlie the contemporary reception and practice of the prose poem. Throughout the book, Monroe manages to argue wonderfully about the politics of modern literary history in relation to the uneasy dialectics of prosaic vs. poetic language—the point being that within this dialectic one must search out the possibilities of the genre's rejuvenation and its "revolutionary" potential. One of the most challenging directions taken by the genre in the latter half of this century is examined in the last chapter of the book, which is devoted to Helga Novak, a writer whose work has so far escaped mainstream critical attention in the United States despite her growing popularity in German-speaking countries.

All of us who teach or study modern and contemporary poetry and care about the complex problems that surround the prose poem owe a considerable debt to Jonathan Monroe for setting the terms for a reading of the genre that goes beyond strictly formal considerations and demonstrates that the prose poem, like any other genre, is not immune from the contingencies of history and the ideological norms of society at large. Without the help of such socio-cultural markers, any attempt to identify the special "properties" of the genre is ultimately as pointless and self-undermining as Jeremy Bentham's famous remark: "Prose is where all the lines but the last go on to the margin—poetry is where some of them fall short of it."

Like Jonathan Monroe, Margueritte S. Murphy sees the prose poem in terms of Bakhtin's notion of the "heteroglot" text, one that undermines the autonomy of the lyric self at the same time as it sets an implicit challenge to the now ossified presumptions of traditional genre theory. For Murphy, as for

Monroe, the prose poem challenges those categorizations that secure contexts in which to read literary texts. Accordingly, she approaches individual texts and writers primarily in terms of their resistance to pre-determined conventions ruling both poetic and non-poetic genres and sub-genres. Where this procedure, in Monroe's study, involves a Marxist hermeneutic, Murphy prefers to center her analysis on the formal choices that determine the prose poem's alliance with "an aesthetic that [values] shock and innovation over tradition and convention" (2-3). Readers turning to Murphy's book in the hope of comprehensive survey of Anglo-American prose poetry will be disappointed, for *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem from Wilde to Ashbery* does not offer a historical account of the development of the contemporary prose poem in English. Instead, Murphy focuses on only three contemporary poets (Williams, Stein and Ashbery) whose work falls into the post-lyric poet's prose category. For Murphy, as for Fredman, Williams is shown to be the dominant figure in the development of a consciously cultivated tradition of the genre, one whose main purpose was to reproduce the ragged but uninterrupted flow of consciousness in a way that emphasizes the poetic possibilities of the American idiom.

The most rewarding part of Murphy's study is her account of the pre-modern history of the genre in which she reflects on the permutations of "Decadent" and modern writing and proceeds to examine how the prose poem first appeared to English audiences in Stuart Merrill's collection of translations from the French, *Pastels in Prose* (1890), as well as in the prose poems of Oscar Wilde and Ernest Dowson. One of the turning points in the history of the genre, Murphy argues, came in 1917 with T. S. Eliot's censure of the genre in an article entitled, "The Borderline of Prose." A detailed account of the polemic against the prose poem singles out the ultra-classicist views of Irving Babbitt (who taught Eliot at Harvard) as the determining influence on Eliot's subsequent condemnation of mixed genres, including the prose poem. The particular object of Eliot's attacks were the prose poems of Richard Aldington, which he saw as a contemporary revival of the "fake primitivism" and pseudo-archaic style of the Decadents. The following vignette is extracted from Richard Aldington's *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis and other Prose Poems*, published in 1917:

NOON

The doves sleep beside the slow murmuring cool fountain;
red five-petalled roses strew the chequered marble;

The flute-girl whispers the dear white ode of Sappho, and
Hierocleia by the pool

Smiles to see the smooth blue sky-reflecting water mirror her
shining body;

But my eyelids are shunned by sleep that is whiter than beautiful
morning, for Konallis is not here.

Aldington's "Noon" contains all the ingredients of a typical neo-Decadent prose poem, including the combination of a colorful, heavily stylized vocabulary and a self-consciously archaic diction inspired by the King James Bible. In the light of this particular kind of prose eclogue, one can easily understand why T. S. Eliot dismissed Aldington's sketches as a relatively uninspired and, ultimately, sterile attempt to emulate the kind of painstaking artifice and stylistic "charlatanism" which characterized the "poetic" prose of Oscar Wilde and Ernest Dowson. In a way, the British prose poem never really recovered from the excesses of the fin-de-siècle generation, and it would not be too far-fetched to argue that Aldington's reliance on "outward" attributes of poeticity—such as stylistic sophistication and imagistic density—is in part responsible for the relative lack of interest of contemporary British poets in the prose poem. Still, one of the major implications of Eliot's rejection of Aldington's sketches was that the modern prose poem needed to rid itself of the stigmata of the Decadent school—as an alternative to poems written in verse, the prose poem could not limit itself to aspiring to the "musical" condition of the verse lyric. As Murphy concludes, the prose poem's greatest potential lies "*in its play with prose as prose—its syntax, discursive conventions, and seeming relationship with the world of fact*" (59). One possible alternative to this conception of the prose poem as a piece of prose resembling a poem because of its ornate language and imagery is suggested by Eliot's one published prose poem, "Hysteria," of which Murphy presents a lucid and persuasive analysis. In this respect, I wonder to what extent she would be willing to agree that Eliot's "Hysteria"—with its interest in burlesque situations and its emphasis on the struggle between the rational mind and the capricious language of the poetic imagination—echoes the equally "hysterical" fantasies of Max Jacob, whose influence on some of the best-known representatives of what can be called the "fabulist" prose poem (a sub-trend of the American prose poem made famous by Russell Edson and Michael Benedikt) cannot be overemphasized.

But it is clear that Murphy feels a special affiliation with longer experimental prose poetry works, rather than with what Mary Ann Caws has identified as the "traditional qualities recognized in the prose poem—brevity, intensity, and self-containment or integrity." In this respect, I must admit to having felt a bit uneasy with the sub-chapter she devotes to the "narrative tendency" of the prose poem. What troubles me was less the analysis itself than Murphy's adoption of a single example of narrative prose poetry (Dowson's "The Princess of Dreams") to account for a rather "tame" trend that "[plays] off the traditional prosaic mode in a fairly straightforward manner" (199). The main problem here is that Murphy's study rarely even mentions contemporary masters of the "short" prose poem, whose works in the genre—despite their frequent affinities with the "straight" genres of the fable, the diary entry, the parable and the "short short story"—have often proved at least as subversive as their more "radical" counterparts and contributed to creating new formal and ideological possibilities for the genre in the last fifteen to twenty years. The prose poems of Bernadette Mayer, Amy Gerstler, Lyn Hejinian and Marga-

ret Atwood come to mind, as do a number of other women writers whose work within and against established narrative genres has had a significant role as a feminine or feminist transgression of male-sanctioned categories and writing practices. In short, one of the main objections that can be raised against Murphy's interpretation of the prose poem as an inherently subversive genre is indeed that it privileges certain aesthetic choices and neglects others. Ironically, Murphy's emphasis on works that evidence Bakhtinian "heteroglossia" leads her to avoid tackling the multiplicity of voices present in the history of the prose poem as a whole. That her featured writers are Williams, Stein and Ashbery, and not, for instance, Patchen, Bly, Edson, Simic and Ignatow is indicative of how her choice of texts dictates, at least to some extent, the features she ascribes to the genre.

In a country where, to quote Marjorie Perloff, "free verse has become quite simply the lyric norm," the prose poem has become a somewhat oppositional or antagonistic force on the American poetry scene, one which has continued to derive its energy from what Suzanne Bernard describes as "the essential antinomy which gives it the character of an Icarian art, aspiring to an impossible transcendence of itself, to the negation of its own conditions of existence." As far as I can tell, it is precisely that tension between content and form, innovation and tradition, which forces the poet to come up with fresh, innovative work, and makes a prose poem, perhaps more than any other poem, an interesting experience. Fortunately enough, critics interested in the prose poem have not yet produced for it an academic handbook of reading strategies, a formalized way of introducing readers and students to what should or should not be considered as a prose poem, as well as to what many have diagnosed as the antagonism between the genre and the lyric-based premises of "mainstream" poetry. This, in itself, is a tribute to the diversity of directions taken by a genre which, at this moment in history, is still variously defined by its practitioners as "a healing form for an overly mental culture," a symptom of the general "collapse of a speech-based poetics after a reign of nearly two centuries," and "a cast-iron aeroplane that can actually fly, mainly because its pilot doesn't care whether it does or not."

Michel Delville