

THE PROSE POEM: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Volume 2 | 1993

A Few Notes on the Future of the Prose Poem Michael Benedikt

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Michael Benedikt

A FEW NOTES ON THE FUTURE OF THE PROSE POEM

It continues to seem to me that there is probably a shorter distance from the unconscious to the Prose Poem, than from the unconscious to most poems in verse. (That's obviously a good thing, it perhaps goes without saying, if the writer has an interesting unconscious; and a bad thing, if not).

Certainly there's a lot of primordial, unconscious, elemental-style imagery among recent prose poems. For example, "A Man," "A Woman" (with which an unusually high proportion of prose poems start out, relative to poems in verse); Earth, Air, Water & Fire (which also make their appearance quite frequently, relative to poems in verse).

These habits are obviously legitimate, psychologically at least, since the unconscious tends to operate in terms of basics.

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On the other hand, that kind of elemental iconography can become a bit mannered, and predictable—like the often-repeated iconography of any period. For example, roses, cloaks, birds, etc., in, say, 16th century Elizabethan poetry, or old ruins, storms, lakes and mountains, in, say, 19th century Romantic poetry.

If the prose poem has a long-term future, as an alternative to writing poems in verse (and as an expression of the unconscious, the imagination, or whatever), it will, I think, have to continue to develop in a way that is still more far-reaching—and proceed by extending itself beyond basics.

I see that as the essential challenge to the Prose Poem for the balance of the 20th century and into the 21st.

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In other words: Although the Prose Poem has its basis in the unconscious, that's no reason why it should be limited to it! Prose poems, of course, aren't merely psychological documents, but are aesthetic artifacts, like any others. The raw unconscious, whatever it is, does not, obviously, automatically constitute Art. (In Art of any kind, obviously, appositeness of self-contained form, and appositeness of self-contained structure—not to mention freshness and originality, etc.—are what count).

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Speaking again, here, as both an occasional literary critic and as a poet who has published books of poetry in both verse and prose formats, it seems to me that the nature of the Prose Poem, itself, seems to particularly encourage qualities having to do with transcendence, and even outright experiment. Not only encourage them, but perhaps demand them! Since its medium *is* prose, the Prose Poem seems to allow for a tremendous flexibility, compared to the situation of verse, where even the formal constraints of "free verse," I've found, can offer a certain natural resistance; and make for somewhat tougher going.

That is (or so it seems to me): Whereas the Prose Poem "format" demands what might even be termed esthetically "radical" formal invention for success, verse accepts it really gracefully, but seems, to some extent, relative to prose poetry, to be able to take it or leave it. And, among other things, the Prose Poem seems to welcome extreme forms of flights into the fantastic, too, whereas, or so it sometimes seems to me, the medium of verse seems to stop, and say to a poet, rather like Jack Benny in his well known laugh-getting one-liner: "Now Wait a Minute!"

(To a poet just beginning his or her poem, for example, even those slight—split-second?—differences, can mean a lot!).

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I tend to take those prose poems most seriously in which the poet pushes his or her unconscious just a little bit harder than one might otherwise expect, against the flinty surface of consciousness, and the realities recognized by the conscious mind. That's where its essential spark is lit, I think—at the point where the meeting of the deeply internal, and the surprisingly external, takes place. That will be reflected, I think, in the degree to which its poets welcome angles-of-vision and other perspectives on the external world which are as revolutionary—and as surprising!—as is the idea of writing poems in prose, itself.

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Critics hostile to the Prose Poem tend to picture it as sinking back rather lackadaisically into the unconscious. To critics hostile to the Prose Poem, the prose poet seems less like a "Seer," than like a lazy person, falling asleep. But the best prose poets seem to me, in fact, to wake from the unconscious, and then draw the unconscious and the conscious together, thus pushing out the borders of the

unconscious still further! Indeed, most of the best prose poets around the world, I believe, have already taken the elemental into account; and then transcended it. The best prose poems in the future—like most of the best prose poems written so far—will, it seems to me, reflect that esthetically healthy paradox. (The poems in English, and in English translation, which I included in *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology*, still amaze me—perhaps because they seem to do the impossible, by effecting reconciliations between the unconscious and consciousness, which one might not have otherwise thought of).