

Independent scholar

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Unsounding the darkness

Abstract:

This paper addresses the question of genre in an attempt to circumscribe the prose poem as a coding of adjacencies of prose and poetry. Its starting point is that both poetry and prose are loose groupings, internally divided by heterogeneous and sometimes obscure criteria inherited from Aristotelian poetics and Latin approaches to prosody. It singles out Charles Baudelaire as the first practitioner of the form because he was self-conscious enough about his creative practice to have committed his thoughts on paper in what reads like a proto-manifesto for the prose poem. ‘Unsounding the darkness’ does not purport to propose a taxonomy of the prose poem, but rather argues for the kinship between prose poetry and the prose poem, conceiving as it does of prose poetry as a form that evolves from an encounter with place and time. The prose poem is a product of that form, inheriting the lyric quality of poetry and the prosaic quality of prose fiction in the conviction of rhythm. The paper seeks to open up questions as to the validity of the distinction between prose poetry and the prose poem in the twenty-first century. It argues for a continuum of erasures rather than for new taxonomies.

Biographical note:

Dominique Hecq grew up in the French-speaking part of Belgium. She holds a PhD in Australian literature and an MA in literary translation. Dominique is the author of a novel, three collections of short fiction, five books of poetry, two plays and numerous scholarly publications. Her work has been awarded a variety of prizes, including the inaugural AALITRA Prize for Literary Translation from Spanish into English (2014). Her poems and stories have been published in anthologies, journals and on websites in Australia and overseas. Her papers have contributed to redefining a poetics suited to creative writing research that makes use of psychoanalytical concepts. *Towards a Poetics of Creative Writing* (2015), for example, explores creative writing in the academy as an avenue for investigating creativity while considering the relevance of psychoanalysis for the arts. *Hush: a fugue* (2017) is her latest book of (prose) poetry.

Keywords:

Prose-poetry – Prose-poem – Genre – *Techné* – Form(ing) – Mode

Sois toujours poète, même en prose. Grand style (Rien de plus beau que le lieu commun)
Always be a poet, even in prose. Grand style. (Nothing more beautiful than the commonplace)
Charles Baudelaire

Our literary arts are made of refusals
Jean Paulhan

...in that which is thinking (*cogitans*), I am never doing anything but constituting myself as object (*cogitatum*). The fact remains that through this extreme purification of the transcendental subject, my existential link to its project seems irrefutable, at least in the form of its actuality, and that '*cogito ergo sum*' *ubi cogito, ibi sum*, overcomes this objection
Jacques Lacan

It all starts with an omen. You sit in the fading sun at the *Abbaye d'Ardenne* in *Saint-Germain la Blanche Herbe*, outside of Caen, France. You note that the abbey was built in the eleventh century. It now houses the *Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine* (IMEC), or Institute of Contemporary Publishing Archives, and that is why you are here, worming your way back into literary history. The library closes on a Friday, which means you are alone for the long Bastille Day weekend, presently enjoying a glass of *Viognier*, a pile of books stacked in the grass on your left, next to the near full bottle. Out of nowhere a black cat appears and lands in your lap. You are not superstitious, but since the prose poem is your subject and Charles Baudelaire has been on your mind, a stanza from 'Les Chats' leaps at you:

Amis de la science et de la volupté
Ils cherchent le silence et l'horreur des ténèbres;
L'Érèbe les eût pris pour ses coursiers funèbres,
S'ils pouvaient au servage incliner leur fierté (Baudelaire 2015: 80)

They too are voluptuous and wise,
seeking silence out, and haunts of shade;
what sombre steeds of hell they would have made
had Erebus cut their arrogance down to size (Baudelaire 2015: 81)¹

With no warning, you remember some famous structuralist interpretation that killed the poem for you one wintery Melbourne night in 1985, and you consider the perils of your own research into literary genres, its rhetoric, aesthetic, linguistic quicksands. Its political quagmire.

Thus your investigation starts with a warning too. In Baudelaire's poem, those 'amis de la science et de la volupté' (Baudelaire 2015: 80) – literally 'friends of science and enjoyment' – clearly refer to poets. They 'seek ... silence out, and haunts of shade' (81), but require awareness of, and diversion from, their own 'arrogance' lest they be punished for it. It is as though, like researchers, they need distraction from the elusive and illusory body of knowledge that has no form. In your case, form is all forms, a voice sounding between the poetic and the prosaic. See how it might play out.

Remember where we are: outside of Caen, two hours after the terrorist attack in Nice. You've been polishing off the bottle of Viognier with the *Abbaye d'Ardenne's* appointed 'security' who joined you at dusk, a thirty or so man with olive skin and a shock of black hair. He has just spoken of the ghosts that haunt this place: On 7 and 8 June 1944 members of the 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend executed twenty Canadian soldiers, some of them wounded, in the garden where you both sit. Goose pimples spread on your skin.

DRAFT (UN-CAT.)

Darkness, but for a slice of moon in the sky. In this haunted space sit a man and a woman. Both look out into the distance. They do not speak. Instead, two voices seem to boom out of their chests.

She: No one else lived, did they?

He: No.

She: What now?

He: It's up to us.

She: What do you mean?

He: Nothing.

She: What do you mean?

He: *Sigh.*

She: *Sigh.*

He: []

She: How do we keep from going mad?

He: We have each other. People.

She: *Hell is other people.*

He: What's it got to do with us?

She: Everything.

He: *Sigh.*

She: *A choice of nightmares, is what I mean.*

In 'The law of genre' Jacques Derrida writes:

Such a distinctive trait *qua* mark is however always a *priori remarkable*. It is always possible that a text, whether it be written or oral-re-marks on this distinctive trait within itself. This can occur in texts that do not, at a given moment, assert themselves to be literary or poetic ... This does not constitute a text *ipso facto* as 'literature,' even though. Such a possibility, always left open and therefore eternally remarkable, situates perhaps in every text the possibility of its becoming literature ... What interests me is that this re-mark-ever possible for every text, for every corpus of traces is absolutely necessary for and constitutive of what we call art, poetry or literature. It under-writes the eruption of *techné*. (Derrida 1980: 211)

You don't know it yet, but this will be the crux of your argument after months of reading about historical, linguistic, philosophical, aesthetic and poetic approaches to the concept of genre. Knowledge is always retroactive. If we write poetry, as Seamus Heaney suggests in 'Personal Helicon' (1966), 'To set the darkness echoing' (59), to understand how we do it amounts to an unsounding of the dark.² It means articulating

choices dictated by intuition and consolidated by formal decisions – sometimes rational, but mostly not.

in that which is thinking (*cogitans*), I am never doing anything but constituting myself as object (*cogitatum*). The fact remains that through this extreme purification of the transcendental subject, my existential link to its project seems irrefutable, at least in the form of its actuality, and that ‘*cogito ergo sum*’ *ubi cogito, ibi sum*,
overcomes this objection
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So, why such trepidation?

To define the prose poem means to ascertain whether it is a genre, or a mode or a form, and therefore we need to briefly tackle the notion of genre. What bothers me is that it is a normative view which seems to rule the problematic of genre throughout much of the history of genre theory because it takes its cue from the treatises of antiquity. Nonetheless, if we shift the emphasis on *writing* genre, that is on *techné*, rather than on *reading* genre, the discussion might be more productive.

Recent studies on genre emphasise the problem of classification over that of norm (Combe 2012). This is the problem which preoccupied Derrida at a philosophical level when he scrutinised questions of definitions, traces, frames and margins. His legacy has been to undermine the concept of genre itself. As is often the case, the poet had preceded the philosopher. Maurice Blanchot makes the connection between the abolition of limits and the advent of the literary in *L’Espace littéraire*:

Le fait que les formes, les genres, n’ont plus de signification véritable, qu’il serait par exemple absurde de se demander si *Finnegans Wake* appartient ou non à la prose et à un art qui s’appellerait romanesque, indique ici ce travail profond de la littérature qui cherche à s’affirmer dans son essence, en ruinant les distinctions et les limites. (1955: 45)

The fact that forms and genres have lost their real meaning, that it would for instance be absurd to ask oneself whether *Finnegans Wake* belongs to prose and to an art that would be called novelistic, indicates the in-depth work of literature as it seeks to affirm itself in its essence while ruining distinctions and limits.³

Closer to us in time and space, John Frow (2014) utilises Derrida’s questioning of limits to raise ideological issues. In particular, Frow’s concern is to articulate the relationship between genre and the politics of interpretive frames such as those of ‘theory’. In light of these brief remarks, intuition suggests that the Derridean project allows, rather than disallows, a writing that is generically self-aware. This may be because, as Blanchot suggests, the literary is that which disables genre by foregrounding and countering the very idea only to renew it through unprecedented practice and systematic work on form. To invoke wildly different texts, André Breton’s telephone book poem (1966: 49–50) and Derrida’s *Glas* (1974) would be prime examples, as would much of fictocriticism and autofiction.

My aim here is to appreciate the boundaries of the prose poem at the limit of poetry and its others, especially prose and prose poetry, imbricated as these forms are with other discourses. Whether this allows or disallows a better understanding of genre is a different matter, one that is well beyond the scope of this paper.

What is poetry?

DRAFT (POETRY)

Darkness, but for a slice of moon high up in the sky
sit a man and a woman

They look out into the indigo walled horizon
don't speak

Two voices boom out of their chests

No one else lived, did they?

We are left with a choice of nightmares

Gérard Genette, in his paper 'Genres, types, modes' (1977) shows that the problem encountered through centuries of poetics has been to accommodate the category of lyric poetry which Aristotle had dismissed. Although Genette does not say it explicitly, he implies that this is a problem for criticism only, and that it is in the practice of the lyric forms that the concept of genre as a set of conventions is properly deployed. Indeed, poetry is not a genre. The term 'genre' applies to formal categories such as the sonnet, the ode, the elegy and the ballad. Each category is aligned in some fashion with the accepted categories of the epic and tragedy while the differentiations within the sets of minor forms are marked by distinctions of prosody, thematic and register. But, this actuality takes its cue from practice, and not from the Aristotelian theory of genres. As Paul Hernadi points out, such practices are the object of inquiry in the tradition of Latin poetics (1972: 170). Renowned for its precision in differentiating metres and registers, the Latin tradition however continues to pose a problem for poets: it does not concern itself with metaphor.

What is prose?

Darkness, but for a slice of moon high up in the sky. In this haunted space sit a man and a woman. Both look out into the indigo walled horizon. They don't speak. Instead, two voices boom out of their chests.

No one else lived, did they?

No.

So we are left with a choice of nightmares.

Prose is also excluded from Aristotelian poetics, which takes as its object writings that 'imitate in verse'. Yet, curiously, the novel features as a minor form of the epic. Perhaps

Joyce was aware of this, and would have appreciated the irony of seeing *Finnegans Wake* restored to its proper place: a novel which, read aloud, sounds like a poem in iambic pentameters. We know the difference between a novel and a philosophical treatise, between a literary novel and a verse novel, and between prose fiction and history. Knowing these, we read accordingly, even though one might blur boundaries to highlight an individual practice, as Baudelaire famously did in his review of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, which he described as '*un roman construit en manière de poème / a novel constructed in the manner of a poem*' (1990b: 247). Yes, even when acutely aware of the notion of genre as practice and therefore subject to change, we read accordingly. But do we write accordingly? I don't think so. Many a writer has rearranged a prose piece into a poem and vice-versa as I have been doing here in order to determine where the recognisable differences between forms lie (see Brophy 2003: 164–71). A further personal example: my first book was published with the caption 'novel' under its title; it was shortlisted for a poetry award and a reviewer drew attention to my 'highly individual prose poetry' (Brooks 2000).

What is prose poetry?

And what would it be to think formal differences within this most elusive formal category? Is this where we would find the prose poem?

Thus far, we do not seem to have an adequate language to articulate what constitutes prose poetry, let alone what makes a prose poem a prose poem and not a poem. Would the distinction between the metonymic and metaphoric axes of language serve us as guide? I doubt it: practice reveals these two axes are not as distinct as the linguists would have it. And indeed, Saussure himself did not distinguish between metaphor and metonymy. So, let us examine exemplars of texts produced by the violation of boundaries in order to operate not a synthesis, but some kind of *disthesis*.

Sois toujours poète, même en prose. Grand style (Rien de plus beau que le lieu commun)
Always be a poet, even in prose. Grand style. (Nothing more beautiful than the commonplace)
Charles Baudelaire

We can infer from the above quotation that, for Baudelaire, poetry is 'Grand style' and prose 'the commonplace' (1990a: 270). Poetry is in the position of the exception and prose is in that which produces ordinary language and the prosaic. The absence of a language adequate to describing the *techné* of a practice of the poetic as opposed to the prosaic may be due to the constraints of a lexicon that provides no general category in our inheritance of these distinctions. Is prose simply the Other of verse and, through metonymic and historic leap, poetry? The long cadences of prose versus the regular metrical lines of yore when the orators used to walk and the muses danced? Or rather the horizontal axis of metonymy against the vertical axis of metaphor? Baudelaire does not speak of metaphor and metonymy. All is rhythm. An individual relationship to time and space. The time and space of history translated onto the page. The accelerated time of poetry in the modern city.

For it is in a city, the space of modern life, that Baudelaire, flâneur, hesitating between two equally telling titles, was to publish his *Petits poèmes en prose* as *Le Spleen de Paris* under the influence of Aloysius Bertrand:

C'est en feuilletant, pour la vingtième fois au moins, le fameux *Gaspard de la Nuit*, d'Aloysius Bertrand, que l'idée m'est venue de tenter quelque chose d'analogue, et d'appliquer à la description de la vie moderne, ou plutôt d'une *vie moderne et plus abstraite*, le procédé qu'il avait appliqué à la peinture de la vie ancienne, et si étrangement pittoresque. (Baudelaire 1990a: 275–76; emphasis added)

It is by leafing through Aloysius Bertrand's famous *Gaspard de la nuit* for the twentieth time at least, that it occurred to me to attempt something analogous, and to apply to the description of modern life, or rather of a *modern and more abstracted life*, the procedure that he had applied to the depiction of a peculiarly picturesque life of yore.

In marked contrast with his criticism, Baudelaire the writer, the practitioner, the technician focuses here on a *procedure* and its relation with a theme: what he seeks to achieve through a form invented by Bertrand is an *abstracting* of descriptive powers, and *abstraction* of realism, we might say. What is interesting is that what is achieved does not meet the initial goal: Baudelaire finds that the combination of Bertrand's manner with his singular theme produces something other than the imitation of a model. A 'personal manner' is here articulated in formal terms:

Mais pour dire le vrai, je crains que ma jalousie ne m'ait pas porté bonheur. Sitôt que j'eus commencé le travail, je m'aperçus que non seulement je restais bien loin de mon mystérieux et brillant modèle, mais encore que je faisais quelque chose (si cela peut s'appeler quelque-que chose) de singulièrement différent. (Baudelaire 1990a: 276)

But to be honest, I fear that my jealousy may have brought me bad luck. As soon as I started working, I realised that not only was I far from approaching the skill of my brilliant example, but also that I was doing something (if this can be called something) surprisingly different.

Contrasting first with the peculiar and the picturesque, the modern is set against the old and then, formally, against two other new formal possibilities, the pre-linguistic cry, which is not poetry, and the song:

Quel est celui de nous qui n'a pas, dans ses jours d'ambition, rêvé le miracle d'une *prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime*, assez souple et assez heurtée pour s'adapter aux mouvements lyriques de l'âme, aux ondulations de la rêverie, aux soubresauts de la conscience?

... Vous-même, mon cher ami, n'avez-vous pas tenté de traduire en une chanson le cri strident du vitrier, et exprimer dans une *prose lyrique* toutes les désolantes suggestions que ce cri s'envole jusqu'aux mansardes, et à travers les plus hautes brumes de la rue? (Baudelaire 1990a: 276; emphasis added)

Who among us has not, at times of ambition, dreamed the miracle of a poetic prose, musical and devoid of rhythm and rhyme, pliable and yet syncopated enough to espouse the lyrical stirrings of the soul, the undulations of day-dreaming, the palpitations of conscience?

... Yourself, my good friend, have you not be tempted to translate the glazier's shrill cry into a song, and to express in some lyrical prose all the painful suggestions that this *cri* might take flight through the mists of the street right up to the servants' quarters?

Thus, for Baudelaire it would seem that prose poetry is the form and the prose poem the product: the *écrit* on the one hand and the *cri* the text carries across metaphorically on the other. At work here is an ideological paradox espoused in generic terms. Note, for example, that it is the elevation of the humble that is here at issue. The task of art has now long been established as 'the transfiguration of the commonplace' (Danto 1981). But as an aside, it may not be lost on you that Cocteau's Orpheus is actually a 'vitrier' / glazier. But I digress.

Baudelaire's city is a city transmuted, the opposite of that city from which the Roman poet is excluded by the orators. This is prose become poetry, yet, in the abandonment of verse it remains formally prose, and distinguishes itself from other prose forms by other formal means:

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, vous prie, quelles admirables commodités cette combinaison nous offre à tous, à vous, à moi et au lecteur. *Nous pouvons couper ou 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. (Baudelaire 1990a: 276)

My good friend, I am sending you a slim volume of which one couldn't say that it has neither head nor tail, for quite on the contrary, it is both head and tail [practising his syntax precisely what he preaches], alternately and reciprocally. Please consider what laudable commodities this combination has to offer everyone, you, myself, the reader. *We can cut wherever we might want to*, me my day-dream, you the manuscript, readers their reading, for I do not underestimate the latter's ingrained refusal of superfluous plotting.

If, as Baudelaire claims, a collection of poetic prose like his *Spleen* does not depend on plot for its syntagmatic organisation, we could follow him and propose a place from which to start answering our question. This place is the negation: 'prose fiction' is not 'prose poetry'. It cannot be cut and re-ordered, printed and read in any sequence. And yet it is precisely this rule, unquestioned by Baudelaire as the differentiation specific of prose fiction, whereby the mixed form of the *poème en prose* needs to distinguish itself, that the modernist and postmodernist practitioners of prose fiction, poetry and philosophy will take upon themselves to challenge again and again in their cosmopolitan cities. Nonetheless, it is worth dwelling on the mention of the manuscript in Baudelaire's list of fragmentable things, for however fragmented a poetic novel might be, its formal materiality differs from that of collection of poems in precisely the way Baudelaire has articulated it. Both may fall under the description of narrative, yet prose poetry remains not being prose fiction. And yet, if conversation is the converse of poetry, it can be converted.

DRAFT (PROSE POE /

TRY

mmm)

Darkness. But for a slice of moon high up in the sky. In this haunted city sit a man and a woman. Both look out into the indigo walled horizon. They don't speak. Two voices boom out of their chests. *No one else lived, did they? No. We are left with a choice of nightmares.*

Intuition tells me that the above fragment is prose poetry and that it might even be a prose poem by virtue of its peculiar adjacency to prose and poetry: the line is the line of prose; the rhythms and images belong to poetic discourse. Really? If this is the case, it is however in so far as one keeps in mind that prose is not the prosaic and poetry not the poetic just as the novel is not the novelistic as Roland Barthes expounds in his last course at the Collège de France (2003). If this is the case, I ought to have used the term 'mode' instead of 'form' throughout this piece. I have attempted to show here that prose poetry and the prose poem are germane in a set of adjacencies deployed through some highly individual discursive practice. I only wish I had a better lexicon at my disposal.

As the Israeli writer Amos Oz puts it: 'there are clever answers and there are evasive answers: there are no simple, straightforward answers' (2009: 2). And so, I must conclude with synthesising a paradox. As Jean Paulhan put it at a point in time when the Baudelairean credo and the Mallarméan project were being threatened by a new realism: 'Our literary arts are made of refusals' (1941: 19) because postmodern though our moves might be, we partake of the legacy of Romantic discourse. To want to distinguish between prose poetry and the prose poem, for example, highlights criticism's normative view. Displacing the emphasis on *writing* and *techné*, rather than on *reading* genre, on the other hand, problematises the idea of genre itself, and shows that the distinction between prose and poetry itself is debatable.

Endnotes

1. In Greek mythology, Erebus, or Erebos, meaning 'deep darkness, shadow', is often conceived a primordial deity personifying darkness. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, Erebus is the offspring of Chaos.
2. The title of this paper takes its cue from Seamus Heaney's line: 'I rhyme myself / 'To set the darkness echoing'. See S Heaney 1966 *Death of a Naturalist* London: Faber, 59.
3. Except where otherwise specified the clumsy translations from the French are mine.

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