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‘words about words make sure self’: Ania Walwicz and a politics of prose poetry

Abstract:

This paper examines how Ania Walwicz uses the protean nature of the prose poem as a medium through which to subvert traditional notions of identity, especially in terms of anxieties about gender and sexuality. According to Dominique Hecq (2009), the prose poem is able to negotiate ‘between notions of a public language of prose and a marginal language of poetry, thereby ... enacting particularly complex modes of engagement between subjectivity and the world’. This paper argues that it is the slippery and transformative nature of the prose poem that lends itself so neatly to a politics of subversion. As a ‘borderline genre’ (Hecq 2009), the prose poem occupies an ambiguous space – it is self-conscious and critical yet immersive and seductive; a medium that offers a deceptive simplicity, or a shocking confrontation with otherness. Oftentimes, the prose poem is capable of both in the same instance. By exploring the prose poetry of Walwicz, this paper contends that rather than being understood as a ‘disturbing and elusive’ literary oddity (Delville 1998), the prose poem can be seen to contest formal traditions of both narrative and identity.

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1. An 'extraordinary beast': Defining the prose poem

Described by Michel Delville as a 'self-consciously deviant form' (1998: 8), the prose poem is nothing if not enigmatic. Efforts at definition often prove fruitless, largely due to the transformative and contradictory operations of the mode. Riffaterre has observed the prose poem is 'the literary genre with an oxymoron for a name' (1983: 117), suggesting a form that is shifting, fragmentary and open to confrontation. In these terms, the prose poem is a demanding creature, pushing, as Dominique Hecq contends, for the 'coexistence of simultaneous and heterogeneous spaces in the mode of (re)presentation' (2009). It is also, despite its nineteenth-century roots, pre-eminently postmodern – indeed, Linda Hutcheon's description of postmodernism as a 'contradictory phenomenon' that 'uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges' (1988: 1) also seems curiously apt for the plurality and flexibility of the genre-bending prose poem. It is a medium marked by its resistance to prescriptive boundaries, and as a result, regarded 'by many as a rather disturbing, if not downright illegitimate mode of literary expression' (Delville 1998: 4). George Barker goes so far as to conclude that it is an illusory and 'extraordinary beast': 'like the Loch Ness monster the prose poem is a creature of whose existence we have only very uncertain evidence' (1985: 1).

As 'a borderline genre' (Hecq 2009), the prose poem has been a source of anxiety since inception. As critics and historians of the genre note, from its origins in the works of nineteenth-century French writers such as Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé, it 'has not ceased to puzzle readers and critics alike' (Delville 1998: 1). As a site of conflict and hybridity, the form seems always to have been accompanied by explanation: in Baudelaire's preface to *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), for example, he speaks of 'the miracle of poetic prose' as 'musical though rhythmless, flexible yet rugged enough to identify with the lyrical impulse of the soul, the ebbs and flows of reverie, the pangs on conscience' (cited Delville 1998: 1). Such lyricism reveals the contradictory impulses of the prose poem, and a desire to reconcile such incompatible urges, a dilemma more contemporarily observed by Kevin Brophy (2002):

It is perhaps impossible to discuss the prose poem sensibly. If you move too far towards categorising the different forms it can take, you can end by defeating its defiant formlessness; and if you move down the path of pointing out its poetic strategies you re-align it with that form of poetry it is deliberately discarding.

But as Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton (2015) note, if 'a hallmark of prose poetry is that it appears to encompass and amalgamate a wide variety of apparently separate forms', then the genre's 'protean tendencies' are not only a natural part of its potential as a genre, but also how its shifting form might be 'well suited to foregrounding identity-making and associated transformations' (2015: 276).

While chasing a definition is, as Delville contends, 'doomed to failure' (1998: 1), this paper argues the mutability of the prose poem is central to understanding how it might operate in re-inscribing the politics of identity. It does so by applying Delville's and Murphy's theorisations of prose poetry to a reading of a selection of Ania Walwicz's prose poetry from *Boat* (1989) and *Palace of Culture* (2014). Hecq has observed the

ways in which the prose poem, as ‘the embodiment of a continuing irresolution of ... two opposing terms’, offers the space for the subversion of both aesthetic and ideological norms. Hecq notes, as a contentious or subversive mode, the prose poem raises questions about literary categories as well its significance for the ‘extra-literary’. Delville observes TS Eliot’s (somewhat ironic) disquiet concerning the ability of prose poetry to ‘hesitate between two media’ (cited Deville 1998: 5), an uneasiness that seems premised on a failure to commit to established frameworks of expression. Yet it is in the gaps in between that the genre is at its most radical, and indeed, that it is able, vis-à-vis postmodern thinking, to reject totality in preference for the provisional. If the prose poem is understood as both a hybrid and resistant form, it lends itself to the expression of a politics in which continuity and closure are contested; to representations that are deconstructive; and, as Hutcheon asserts, to contexts in which ‘the centre no longer completely holds’ (1988: 12). In relation to notions of identity, the dissident genre of prose poetry thus enables a subversive articulation of self and other. To extend Lee Upton’s discussion of the structural politics of prose poetry (1993), this paper claims that the prose poem, as it overlaps and disputes ‘literary boundaries’, is suited to aesthetic experimentation *and* political confrontation, for it suggests ‘multiple perspectives, changeable limits, floating borders and shifting contours’ (Caws 1983: 180).

2. Grounds for subversion: The prose poem and a penchant for politics

In *Genre*, John Frow argues that ‘texts work upon genres as much as they are shaped by them’ (2015: 28), suggesting that all generic modes are open to the possibilities of transformation. Yet in its dual form, the prose poem challenges the ‘formal expectations and prescriptive boundaries between literary genres’, ideas about which remain relatively stalwart regardless of the understanding that ‘verse and poetry are no longer necessarily synonymous’ (Delville 1998: 4). It is arguably this insistence on borderlines from which prose poetry draws its subversive potential, relying on the formal premises of traditional poetry to unsettle the conventions of both poetry and prose. In these terms, Hetherington and Atherton’s suggestion that ‘prose poetry turns on an anxiety of space’ that could be ‘defined as an instance of the Freudian *uncanny*’ reveals the disarming experience of reading prose poems, through which ‘the familiar is made strange’ (2015: 275).

The contradiction of the ‘familiar made strange’ is central to Margueritte Murphy’s discussion of how the prose poem ‘performs’ both in relation to genre and in terms of reader expectations. In *A Tradition of Subversion*, Murphy observes, for example, how the visual cues of a prose poem – what Delville calls ‘discursive and typographical violations’ (1998: 9) – create a sense of cohesion which belies the fragmentary nature of the genre. As Murphy notes, while ‘many prose poems may resemble anecdotes, parables, or short descriptive sketches, or other prose fragments’ – categories which are necessarily incomplete – the ‘block-like appearance’ of prose poetry, ‘fuller on the page than a verse poem’, creates an impression of totality and closure (1992: 65–66). The visual representation seems to offer completion, yet it remains a ‘fragment of discourse’ (1992: 66). Consequently:

This ‘fragmentary’ aspect may well stem from the fundamental tension of the prose poem – the suggestion and subversion of traditional prose genres. This tension creates textual cul-de-sac; the text never realises generic completion since its genre is necessarily divided against itself. Yet its block-like appearance seems to imply some wholeness unto itself. (1992: 66)

Borrowing from Todorov, Murphy acknowledges that the ‘anarchic polymorphism’ of the prose poem does not occur in a vacuum but is rather the result of how genres work as a series of interconnections, inversions, displacements and transformations (1992: 67). Prose poetry is thus constantly reliant on those traditions that it is compelled to disrupt, a writing against in order to write anew (1992: 67). This emphasis on the ‘inherent duality of the prose poem’ (Delville 1998: 9), signalled by both its name and its ‘Janus-faced’ (Hetherington and Atherton 2015: 279) behaviour, reveals how the genre can be put to use as a means for articulating new visions of the self, articulations which are increasingly crucial in an ostensibly post-feminist and post-colonial world. The potential is liberatory – as Hetherington and Atherton assert, in ‘its creation of a new genre that is at least two other genres at once’, the prose poem ‘emphasises that instability of what may otherwise look fixed and known, also emphasising what is fluid and coming-into-being’ (2015: 276).

In its generic complexity, then, the prose poem enables the dissembling of other boundaries and borderlines, especially those associated with social and cultural norms. If, as Brophy argues, the prose poem ‘must be an intellectual form of writing because it constantly problematises its nature’ (2002), then it makes sense that it is a genre suited to problematising *per se*, particularly in relation to homogeneity of ‘mass’ or dominant culture. Indeed, as this paper argues, prose poetry creates a rich space for the enunciation of feminist and postcolonial worldviews, most persuasively in the context of writers who embrace postmodern notions of selfhood as fragmented, fictionalised, and fluid. More importantly, it is also a mode suited to decentred modes of expression that seek to challenge hierarchies of power and traditional social narratives. Murphy’s attention to the contradiction between prose poetry as a form – which appears complete – and its content – which is nearly always only ever a part of a never-seen whole – highlights the opportunities it offers as a genre in the representation of ‘marginal’ voices and perspectives. This sense of disconnect quite radically facilitates a ‘rethinking and putting into question of the bases of ... western modes of thinking’ (Hutcheon 1988: 8), in preference for complication, contradiction, and change. In this way, prose poetry not only ‘celebrates dichotomies’ but also dissembles ‘existing distinctions’ to challenge whether they are really very meaningful at all (Hetherington and Atherton 2015: 279). Indeed, while Mary Ann Caws’ vision of the prose poem as composed of ‘floating borders and shifting contours’ (Caws 1983: 180) might seem vague, it is this sense of movement and ambiguity that is so important to the genre’s capacity to challenge the political status quo.

3. ‘i’m ready i’m ready i don’t stop me’: Ania Walwicz’s radical prose poetics

In understanding the prose poem as a form of disruption, it is clear, as Delville notes, that the genre functions as ‘the locus of convergence or conflict of various discourses which in turn reflect a variety of extra-discursive realities, including a number of specific social, political and ideological agendas’ (1998: 8). The prose poetry of Ania Walwicz has most often been received in terms of its intersectional approach to the experiences of both women and migrants, resulting in complex works that question, as Gunew argues, ‘when one speaks (history) and how (enunciation), from where (positionality) and partially (subjects-in-process)’ (1991: 13). Lyn McCredden has similarly observed how Walwicz’s ‘taking up of marginality’ offers a position from which to ‘investigate and rewrite the contours of the self’ (1996: 235), an endeavour located in an exploration of the self as migrant and the self as a series of gendered inscriptions. These identity deconstructions are also connected to notions of authorship, and how the limits of language might be contested. McCredden suggests that ‘such notions are redolent of a desire for traditional authorial lineage and control ... a contradictory desire, both for self-birth, and for acknowledgement of a formal tradition from which the poet emerges’ (1996: 235). Indeed, these conflicting impulses are also recognised by Walwicz, conveyed as a struggle between definition and belonging, and rejection and resistance:

My own work has been identified with the positions of marginality, multiculturalism, ethnicity, migration, abjection, experimentation, feminist literary theory, postmodernism, the avant-garde. Do I have to provide a definition, an affiliation, a sense of belonging to a group? Will I still be an author if I do not write or publish? One can call oneself an author. One can name oneself. One can call oneself, ‘author’.
(Walwicz 1996: 58)

As the prose poem dissembles clear boundaries of genre, so too does Walwicz problematise essentialist notions of identity, especially those associated with gender and sexuality. McCredden has noted that the ‘impulse to return to origins, to childhood and new beginnings, is a recurrent one in Walwicz’s work’ (1996: 235); it is significant, for example, that the first poem of *Boat* (1989) should be about a girl who re-makes herself outside of the narratives told by others:

They brought me up to be ugly and ugly. To be clever and useful. To be a drone. I’m queen. I’ve got the beauty on me and in me ... They were keeping me under. They were not letting me be as I really ... Then I let it come out. Let her come out. I was beautiful.
(1989: 1)

Similarly, Walwicz’s more recent *Palace of Culture* (2014), with its attention to the predatory and sexualised tropes and motifs of fairytales, opens with ‘begin’, an affirmation of identity focussed on the liberatory effects self-construction: ‘i begin i begin to i begin to dream i dream what i begin say say what you see now i dream about what i dream i have a dream now what i see now’ (2014: 1). The repeated ‘i’, a characteristic feature of Walwicz’s poetry, is fluid yet controlling, assertive and defiant in claiming a sense of freedom, including its risks, which are neatly but fiercely captured in an extended metaphor about lighting fires: ‘now i light me’ (2014: 1). The emphasis on identity as something that is ceaselessly evolving is central to Walwicz’s conceptualisation of subjectivity and, as McCredden posits, often emerges from images

of birth and childhood, what Sue Gillett describes as an ‘emphatic insistence’ (1991: 239). This attention to nascent selves makes sense in the context of ideas concerning the relationship between language and ‘the possibility of renewal’ (McCredden 1996: 235), hence an experimental approach which repeatedly demands the performance of the poet and endless interpretations, many of which are made problematic by Walwicz’s linguistic slipperiness. In incanting a new self, for instance, Walwicz’s distinctive lack of punctuation, use of repetition, neologisms, and colloquial phrases slip between the post-structural gaps in ideas about fixed meaning and fixed selfhood. Indeed, as Gillett contends:

Through the variety of her permutations of language – wayward, untutored, childish, foreign, hysterical, extravagant, depleted, mechanical, freewheeling – Walwicz dramatizes the tension between the personal desire for expression and the public demands of language ... This gap between ‘how it should be’ and ‘how it is’ written is the gap between the institution and the individual: it enacts the struggle to express oneself as special, new, different, the attempt to make one’s own personal place within the impositions of the already encoded signs, the already limiting, standard Language. (1991: 248)

The effect is an impression of identity that is constantly in flux, unable to be definitively ‘read’. In ‘trick’, for example, there is a focus on ideas about appearance and illusion, on the ability to ‘make this up’ (Walwicz 2014: 97), and an ambivalence associated with the stability of ‘trust’. Instead, the poet/narrator has ‘this trick in me’ – the capacity to ‘imagine that what is true to me’ and to embody that self,

you trick me i trick me i do this to me embrace me and nice me your’e lovely just lovely
mister magic comes i trick me i me i do me this what i do me i have to trust that
somebody said trust me just trust me now and i trust me i shouldn’t trust me tell me i
make this up to me he cleans black show shoes black shoes of a man who wouldn’t
love me just allude to illude to illusion of make it up to me you make this up to me i
imagine that just imagine that what is true to me isn’t true to me i make any thing be
what i want it to be i have this trick in me. (Walwicz 2014: 97)

As noted, Walwicz frequently returns to anxieties concerning gender, particularly in relation to the ‘making’ and dressing of women’s physical bodies. McCredden argues that readers of Walwicz often celebrate the ways in which her poems ‘institute new language forms, new subject positions, escape routes from conventional and patriarchal language’ (1996: 235). While such claims are undoubtedly problematic, echoing thinking such as Cixous’ *écriture féminine* for example, the opportunity to express ‘difference, otherness’ in ways that ‘make a voice for the silenced poet, migrant, woman’ (McCredden 1996: 239) is arguably a radical one enabled by the fragmentary and fluid space provided by the ‘deviant’ prose poem. That is, in line with Murphy’s discussion of prose poetry as a form that appears but consistently eludes completeness, Walwicz is able to construct a voice for difference in ways that dodge around and between dominant discourses surrounding gender, sexuality and subjectivity. The result is a resistance towards cohesion, and an emphasis on performance, creation and ‘re-making’, as illustrated in ‘cloth’ (2014: 50), in which the poet attempts to undo and unmake to construct the self anew:

allthat was done before i did take it back to when i don't know when i say when then say when then say when before that was done before i was done undo me then no rips or cuts just smooth rides a ride a red rider does rot rot before i did when i did when did i start that red dress on me.

Importantly, Walwicz blurs the line between the material and the subjective: the physical self is constructed alongside the subjective, and both remain impermanent.

Unlike the confidence of 'begin' or 'trick', however, there is a haunting sense of pleading in 'cloth', a desperation to transform, to be made 'nice and fresh' again after tragedy or error. The repeated reference to cutting cloth, unpicking stitches, re-sewing and wearing dresses initially evokes the performance of gender as an irreparable connection between external and internal realities, of female biology sewn to feminine behaviours and attributes. The 'red satin' of the fabric is linked to images of cuts, scratches and pricks, suggesting the loss of virginity but also of sexual crimes and sin, especially when coupled with the refrains 'before i did it' and 'before i was made to do this' (2014: 51). The confusion between complicity and victimhood, however, is less ambiguous than a distressing reminder of the objectification of girls, and the obsession with the purification or even sanctification of their bodies even as they are preyed upon: 'undo me no seams or cuts on me in me seeseem less now and apart' (2104: 51). The innocence of girlhood is figured as horrifically lost, while the potential to 'start before i was cut' (2014: 50) is as tragic as it is emancipatory:

when i said dress before i was made red sascar start satin slipper on me before i dress take i take back a return to prime foir first matter natter take me said when or where before then or when before i was intp me the way i am before i was made and sewn and cut in slip and bit and sew machine and skippy skip whirly twirly Shirley early said take me back bring back bread take back return me said i want to start all over said i don't like what i have start all over said clean slate table cloth undo dress unpluck undo what i did me i want to me all over said unclothe said undo undone and done over said editout and make like never ever Inever ever before and more now like never ever before now and that like it was never. (2014: 51)

According to Murphy, the prose poem is:

involved in many "mockeries": among them, the mockery of the concept of fixed genre. As a genre posed in opposition to what may have seemed a fundamental generic division – between poetry and prose – it calls for the abandonment of set forms and conventions. (1992: 85)

In utilising the 'protean' (Hetherington and Atherton 2015: 269) tendencies of the prose poem, Walwicz is able to match form to content as she explores the mutable possibilities for understanding and performing gender. Arguably, Walwicz works to 'break' off language though syntactical and spelling errors, sing-song interruptions ('skippy skip whirly twirly'), and expressions that collide and jump from the abstract – such as fragments of memory and emotion – and the material – 'sewn and cut in slip and bit and sew machine'. Such strategies work with the effect of an attempt to break through the gender and sexual norms that language inscribes; disrupting the order of patriarchy through a language that is disordered, chaotic, and resistant to singular readings or interpretations.

Walwicz's approach is in line with Judith Butler's theorisation of gendered identity as something which 'ought not be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (1990: 139). Walwicz's treatment of gender as construction – and as a performance that is both fluid and changeable – is arguably so powerful because it works in sync with the prose poem and its 'radical unpredictability' which, Murphy argues, 'empowers the text vis-à-vis its readers, by leading them intimately into its subversive discourse if they are to "make sense" of it all, making them "writers" in Barthes' sense' (1992: 89). Importantly, such unpredictability comes from the 'instability' or 'problematisation of reference' which emerges in the prose poem due to a 'sometimes adversarial dynamic between the text and reader' (Murphy 1992: 89). This effect often arises in Walwicz's poetry in relation to the troubling of traditional sentence structures, which in her works begin and end with the discretion or determination of the reader, as well as slippery referentials when it comes to personal pronouns. McCredden questions the alienating effects of such tactics, noting that while such an 'entering into language' offers one way of 'denting the strong, monolithic voice of authority', it also means, to some extent, submitting to the 'processes of alienation' (1996: 239).

This sense of alienation returns to Hetherington and Atherton's argument about the ways in which prose poems make the familiar strange. In the context of Walwicz's efforts to reinscribe gender and sexual norms, it also highlights the problem of newness: that is, the inability to entirely sever language from its previous meanings in order to create new significations. As Murphy contends, 'the tension between the desire of the text or the word to be autonomous and self-empowered and the impossibility of abandoning reference and representation completely continues to haunt the avant-garde prose poem' (1992: 89). It is this logic that explains the limits of Walwicz's experimentation, yet it also underlines her poetic and political strategies all the more clearly. Indeed, while to some extent Walwicz must acknowledge the 'boundaries of language' (McCredden 1996: 239), which cannot be made again 'before all that once upon a time' (Walwicz 2014: 51), what is also apparent is that existing language structures (and meaning) *can* be subverted and broken in ways that challenge the familiar, and contest borderlines that have been accepted as natural and ordinary.

A particularly vivid example of these subversions occurs in 'needle', which again evokes the processes of sewing as a metaphor for fashioning the body along gender lines. Unlike 'cloth', however, with its emphasis on fear and shame, 'needle' takes up a traditionally female occupation in order to transgress its domestic norms and to place its narrator – another ambiguous 'i' – outside of identity 'rules'. Gillett notes how 'through the use of staccato rhythms, repetitions, syntactical "errors", erratic or missing punctuation, mixed tenses and other eccentricities, Walwicz's writing dramatizes the systematic, mechanical, artificial, non-organic nature of language' (1991: 246). Yet it is also able to highlight the artificial nature of gender as a narrative that requires the same kind of systematic interruptions. In this poem, therefore, the protagonist becomes the needle that is able to stitch autonomously and with complete disregard for gender 'rules'; it is guided only by desire and with constant attention to opportunities for change:

i sew me i get a packet of needles i'm a needle now I'm sharp tip with a little eye i go right in i make me better i make me i sew me needles and pins that's how it begins i start needles with i sew me good fly stitch star cross stitch centre in hold fold pin lines to make body to make arms turn raw edge i sew me a skin i can make me anything i make me some better now i make me into i make me anything i like feel do i want a rubber willy sew yes i'll sew it i'll sew it on i do i needle am sharp. (Walwicz 2014: 219)

The identity being sewn becomes both male and female, masculine and feminine, transitioning between subjectivities and sexualities with ease. As 'needle', the persona is undoubtedly phallic – 'i go right in' – penetrating the fabric in order to shape a sense of self, yet this self is both 'best made girl' (220) and 'boy' (219), as well as becoming in some instances simultaneously male- and female-identified. Walwicz's focus on strength – 'forever i'm strong' (219 – and emphasis on the construction of a subject shaped by desire seems to offer freedom from constraint. Interestingly, the subject of the poem, the ever-changing 'i', takes up physical space ('i make me tall') and through the 'magic' of sewing, is able to 'fly' (220). The rhythm of the poem, with Walwicz's typical absence of punctuation, and the smooth movement of activity – from the drawing of patterns to cutting and stitching fabric, then to undoing – mimics the motion of needle and thread but also suggests continuation, transformation and indefiniteness. Significantly, the shift away from the details of the material body as locked in objective facts makes possible a transgression of gender norms that see culture and biology as irreparably fixed: 'i make me a sarah a willy i can be any i want i make body i sew me i did have any i didn't have any body i made me i make me till i'm done and ready' (220).

Ultimately, then, Walwicz's use of the prose poem can be understood as a way of seeking authorship through expressions which resist totality, forever 'coming-into-being' (Hetherington and Atherton 2015: 276) rather than arriving at a final form. In the same way that the prose poem is always both fragment and whole, the narrative 'i' of Walwicz's poems is always captured in the instance of the moment, and in the process of happening. Murphy argues that the prose poem can partly be defined by its 'mimetic function as an imitation or representation of the speech of the Other(s) rather than the representation of some concrete "reality"' (1992: 90) and it is certainly in this context that Walwicz makes (political) use of the mode. McCredden contends that an insistence of Walwicz's 'strange-looking prose poems' is towards the dissolution of 'any core, any possibility of self-knowledge or stability of self' that often results in contradiction, characterised by 'gaps in logic and consistency ... willed verbal spontaneity, the ducking in and out of coherence, the perpetual blurring of limits between prose and poetry, sexual boundaries, meaning and anti-meaning' (1996: 236). There is also that persistent sense of alienation and isolation, often figured in Walwicz's work as a consequence of the drive to define subjectivity as other and outside the expectations of cultural (i.e. patriarchal) norms.

The anxiety of this is expressed in 'author' (Walwicz 2014: 107), in which the poet both proudly declares authorship as an occupation and as a process of selfhood, yet also confesses fear at being 'self-made': 'i am author of who writer the one that does that does this that does to me i am author autor the one who writes this i'm author autor

while i do this only while whilst while only then when i do this i author'. According to Gillett, Walwicz thereby:

inserts herself into the circuits of the machine ... and in the escape from the Romantic spirit of the unified 'I', in the sliding between semantic shifters, imprints herself on the page, exists in the black marks, becomes 'I' and 'me' and 'this' and 'here', sometimes even 'you' and 'she', sometimes even 'he', constantly renewable and changeable, but still solid. (1991: 244)

As with 'needle' and 'cloth', the poet now uses words to create a narrative of identity, suggesting control over the orchestration of self and a taking on of a 'prophetic, authoritative role' (McCredden 1996: 239). A voice and thus a person is offered through Walwicz's 'eclectic and pluralistically diverse choices' (McCredden 1996: 239), with difference, and the struggle for a transformative, reality-making language, repeatedly emphasised over the threat of stability or stagnation.

Conclusion

Given the tendency of both the prose poem and Walwicz's identity politics towards a sense of movement and change, it seems fitting that the final poem of *Palace of Culture* describes a protagonist who leaves, with no destination in mind but only a desire to see what might happen next:

on road now said stay that on now said what car will take me where or order i don't
order wait and see now what will happen to me next and what next tell methis drives
me this takes me where it wants me till until i'm ready then i'm ready when i'm ready
i'm ready i don't stop me. (2014: 109–10)

Indeed, it is significant that so many of Walwicz's poems concentrate on notions of loss and abandonment, on letting selves go in order to unshackle not only subjectivity, but also language, meaning, and form. Gillett argues that in this way:

Walwicz gets inside language ... cracks its codes ... Identity becomes destabilized, unfixed, but not non-existent or meaningless: it becomes a game of creativity, a place of shifting boundaries, shifting moods, a light, skipping thing, a sliding from image to image, a release from the pre-established picture. (1991: 243)

It is a description that could also easily speak to prose poetry itself, with its 'multiple negotiations with literary and utilitarian discourses (Delville 1998: 250), and its resistance towards reduction. As Hetherington and Atherton lyrically suggest, prose poetry is multi-faceted, 'looking forwards and backwards, understanding transitions, providing passageways and doorways. Space opens before and behind it, sometimes like closed rooms, sometimes like expanding fields' (2015: 279). In its liminality and 'deviant' proclivities, the prose poem offers a space that powerfully connects with a politics of subversion. Indeed, as this paper has argued, it is a genre that takes up marginality and offers a complex position from which to trouble the contours of self and other, to challenge the borderlines of language and meaning, and to suggest the possibilities of plural, shifting and dynamic selves that can be undone and remade:

i want to start all over said i don't like what i have start all over said clean slate table
cloth undo dress unpluck undo what i did me i want to do me all over said unclothe
said undo undone. (Walwicz 2014: 51)

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