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Formless form, or the return of form? Prose poetry in practice and theory

Abstract:

Any study of prose poetry almost inevitably invokes the problem of genre. That is, generic uncertainty will always be of interest in a form that crosses a supposed boundary between prose and poetry and brings into play attempts at sharp demarcations and taxonomies with the aim of marking out territories of the poetic and the prosaic (and all stops between). In this paper, I would like to suggest that discussions of form in relation to prose poetry are symptomatic of larger struggles around form that have taken place at the level of critical practice. To do this, I suggest rather than a return of the prose poem form taken from a retro-fitting of poetic literary history, we might see the prose poem as a convergence with very short forms of prose fiction, and to look at the varying ways that these forms have been specified in their traditions. Secondly, I will look at the rise of 'new formalism' as a way of contextualising the critical background around which these arguments might be seen.

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Keywords:

Prose Poetry – Form – Writing practice – New formalism

Any study of prose poetry almost inevitably invokes the problem of genre. That is, generic uncertainty will always be of interest in a form that crosses a supposed boundary between prose and poetry and brings into play attempts at sharp demarcations and taxonomies with the aim of marking out territories of the poetic and the prosaic (and all stops between). Prose poetry here plays the role of a 'subversive', 'extra-generic' or 'unclassifiable' literary form. Poet Kevin Brophy, for example, has written about the 'defiant formlessness' of prose poetry (Brophy 2002). Peter Johnson suggests 'if there is such a creature as the prose poem … its existence depends partly on its ability to plunder the territories of many other like genres' (Johnson 2000).

It is the acceptance of the prose poem's undecidability of form that has cleared the ground for poets, *as practitioner*s, to work. And this has in turn allowed a perceived freedom from the poets 'habitual way of seeing the world' – freedom from what Charles Simic calls 'the struggle to fit words inside a line or a stanza' (Simic 2010). American prose poet Russell Edson suggests, manifesto-like, 'We want to write free of debt or obligation to *literary form or idea*; free even from ourselves, free from our own expectations … There is more truth in the act of writing than in what is written' (1997: 38; emphasis added).

However, with the 'discovery' and uptake of prose poetry in the last 30 or 40 years comes an attempt to ground the practice in established formal traditions. The form of prose poetry is often traced through the lens of 'poetic-ness' – a history of the relation to or contrast with traditional poetic forms: from the French symbolists, through modernist poetics and to the current revival of the form. Prose poetry is often defined in a sense, by how it is 'not poetry', while retaining, somehow, enough poetic qualities to qualify, however remotely, *as* poetry. This allows Kevin Brophy, for example, to suggest that prose poetry fails to gain a foothold in the English-speaking world as free verse becomes the dominant form, allowing free verse forms to take the 'prosaic' weight of modernism and thereby making prose poetry redundant until its revival in the late 1980s and 1990s (Brophy 2002). This is a narrative of the redundancy and then renaissance of a long-forgotten and now rediscovered form.

These positions create tension between form and what we might call non-form, or the evasion of form. For the practising poet in this context, prose poetry is a form beyond line breaks and stanzas; a realm of freedom. However, in a broader literary historical sense, prose poetry is a 'return of form' – the revival of a tradition. This tension often surfaces around definitions of what is 'poetic' and 'prosaic', and where and if the two meet. While this brings in ideas of genre from the literary critical angle, prescriptive formulas arise that circumscribe prose poetry as an area of activity via its formal components. For example, Janet Newman's vague 'prose poetry achieves the effects of poetry by abandoning aspects of prose' (Newman 2015: 204). Or, equally vague, from the *Writer's Relief* website: 'Does your work straddle the line between poetry and prose? Then it's a prose poem. Is it solidly narrative in its presentation? Then it's probably flash fiction' (Anon 2013).

These statements seem to me to recast the terms of the formal 'freedom' that prose poetry offers the practitioner in favour of paradoxical (albeit vague) attempts to further

identify the genre in question. Even the abandonment of such attempts seems to me to be an indicator, in a negative way, of the importance of the issues at stake.

In this paper, I would like to look at the concept of form in relation to prose poetry, not as a way of coming to some definitive conclusion on the matter, but rather to suggest that discussions of form in relation to prose poetry are symptomatic of larger struggles around form that have taken place at the level of critical practice. To do this, I suggest rather than a *return* of the prose poem form taken from a retro-fitting of poetic literary history, we might see the prose poem as a convergence with very short forms of prose fiction, and might look at the varying ways that these forms have been specified in their traditions. Secondly, I will look at the rise of 'new formalism' as a way of contextualising the critical background around which these arguments might be seen. In doing this, I hope to suggest that arguments (or non-arguments) around form in prose poetry are subversive, not only in Delville's sense of the possibilities of the multi-generic reinvention of writing, but in the sense that it has the potential to disrupt and reintroduce discussions of form with varying degrees of resonance, at different levels.

Convergence or renaissance of forms?

The rhythmic form of the short-short story is often more temperamentally akin to poetry than to conventional prose, which generally opens out to dramatise experience and evoke emotion; in the smallest, tightest spaces, experience can only be suggested (Joyce Carol Oates in Shapard, Thomas and Coover 2008: 247).

While the narrative of the poetic discussion of prose poetry (when it is allowed that it is poetry) has been around the rediscovery of an older form and the renaissance of a tradition, from the prose position the major focus has been on the innovation and reinvention of literary fiction to attune to recent technological changes and the resultant changes in reading cultures. As Julian Gough suggests:

> My generation, and those younger, receive information not in long, coherent, self-contained units…, but in short bursts with wildly different tones … That changes the way we read fiction, and therefore must change the way we write it … The traditional story (retold ten thousand times) suffers from repetitive strain injury. Television and the internet have responded to this crisis without losing their audience. Literary fiction has not. (Gough in Shapard 2012)

Prose seems more open to this narrative of reinvention than does poetry. Charles Simic, in discussing his Pulitzer Prize winning book of prose poems *The Book of Gods and Devils,* talks about the opprobrium he received from conservative poetry critics 'who demanded to know how a prize meant to honor poetry could be given to something that by definition is not poetry' (Simic 2010). He does not speak of mining the history of prose poetry to bring about a renaissance in the form. Rather, he suggests a process of collecting the marginalia, or half-formed 'narrative fragments', from the notebooks he used to compose poetry.

> My notebooks are full of passages of verse endlessly revised and often crossed out. They also contained, in the years preceding the publication of that book, other kinds of

> writing that looked like narrative fragments, along with ideas for poems consisting of isolated phrases and images strung together. (Simic 2010)

Ironically perhaps, the introduction of technology, in this case an old personal computer given to him by his son, leads to him seeing these 'fragments' as work in their own right.

> One day, not having anything else to do, and since I suddenly liked how they sounded, I read and copied a few of these short passages of prose. By the time I had gone through a dozen notebooks, I had some one hundred and twenty pieces, most no longer than a few short paragraphs. Nevertheless, I begin to think that I might have a book there. (Simic 2010)

That is, at the service of a compulsion to use the technology, he looks for something to work on. Remembering these fragments, these leavings on the workshop floor, if you like, he quickly crafts them into something that might be a book. Later, his editor calls them 'prose poems' not to place them in a reviving tradition, but to appease the marketplace: '"You have to call them something", she explained to me, "so that the bookstore knows under what heading to shelve the book". After giving it some thought, and with some uneasiness on my part, we decided to call them prose poems' (Simic 2010).

That Simic characterises the re-telling of this process as a 'confession' speaks eloquently about a narrowing but persistent view against prose poetry as *poetry*. But it also aligns with the narratives around the rise of microfiction where, similarly, practitioner accounts of the recent turn to short form writing concentrate not on engagements with history, and only sometimes on an engagement with technology, but rather on the happy accidents of curating what might be called 'experiments'. As Robert Shapard suggests in describing the process of working on 1985's *Sudden Fiction* anthology, 'these stories weren't a renaissance of ancient forms. They were attempts to *reinvent* fiction' (2012; emphasis in original). These examples indicate, at least from the perspective of the practitioner, less a revival of form than being enticed into the (re)invention of (seemingly) novel ways of working.

From this perspective, the identification of texts as 'prose poetry' or 'micro-fiction' seems arbitrary or the result of forces beyond formal consideration, and yet these formal identifiers persist, are negotiated and fought over. This, I should say, is not necessarily an unwelcome position. If anything it tells us about the effects of the critical gaze in understanding/co-opting/reifying formal innovation, or is symptomatic of communities of taste that *require* identity, demarcation, distinction and fragmentation. Or, it tells us that however liberating or innovative the form might appear – however 'formless' – that it never really escapes the reach of formal consideration, no matter how the practitioner sees it.

Accounts of microfiction are not immune from tracings of history similar in style to that of prose poetry if not in intent. Here connections are made to other short form writing and older forms such as fables and parables, or to non-English language traditions, like *haibun,* or to the broader global uptake of micro-fiction in Latin America, China and Indonesia (Howitt-Dring 2011: 48–49; Shapard 2012). Rather than

the narrative of rediscovery put forward by advocates for prose poetry as poetry, micro-fiction's concern is with forming a connection to an authentic tradition:

> Microfiction was not created to satisfy the small attention spans sadly synonymous with the twenty-first century, or to benefit readers who would prefer to peruse online material … Its historical uses in world literature show a form perhaps even centuries older … than this assumption supposes. (Howitt-Dring 2011: 49)

The 'perhaps' here is telling. Howitt-Dring, I think, is right here to challenge the easy explanations for the rise of short form writing. Bemoaning attention spans, changed reading preferences, or the perceived dire effects of changes in cultural consumption have been a standard response to new cultural forms engendered by technological change. However, prose fiction has a history of changes of form in the face of technological innovation. The ubiquity of digital technology is perhaps only the most recent iteration of a consistent theme from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, where the improvements in technologies of mass printing led to a proliferation of journals, magazines, periodicals and newspapers, all requiring content of particular forms to fit particular spaces, and these flowed on to the way writers engaged with particular prose forms as a condition of selling work. So, for example, Henry James tells us that 'very short tales – things of 7,000 to 10,000 words' are 'the easiest things to place' (Current-Garcia and Patrick 1961: 26–28) or Anton Chekhov's lament:

> I like taking things easy, and see no attraction in publishing in white-hot haste … I like to take pains and dawdle. But what am I to do? I begin a story on September 10th with the thought that I must finish it by October 5th at the latest; if I don't I shall fail my editor and be left without money. (Current-Garcia and Patrick 1961: 20–25)

A fuller understanding of prose poetry would engage with the prose side of the equation, embracing and trying to integrate arguments around the rise of very short form writing as an innovation and its relation to technological change and movements in global culture. Arguments around the contemporary rise of the prose poem seem to me to act, however unconsciously, to try and police the borders of poetry *as* poetry. Seeing the rise of the prose poem in conjunction with the rise of micro-fiction opens up the field to a view that might see a convergence of form, not only a recovery or renaissance of form.

Practitioners who have turned to prose poetry do so not at the behest of reviving a tradition, but as a mode of experiment, or escape from formal constraints. We might call this tension one of revival of form with formal innovation, and with this a tension between critical accounts of prose poetry, and practitioner accounts. This, in turn, foregrounds another tension: that between practice and criticism, or practice and theory.

The return of form

Rather than debating the formal qualities (or lack thereof) of prose poetry or micro-fiction, I'd like to situate this argument as an incidence in a broader critical context, as a way of positioning arguments that seem to me to be at the edges of discussions that prose poetry evokes: such as, for example, critical versus practitioner-based understandings of form, or the characteristics of poetry, or prose, or even the generic

limits and mutabilities of both. This is a relatively recent set of discussions regarding the 'return' of form, or 'new formalism' evolving against a number of backdrops as a question regarding the role of form in cultural theory, literary criticism and poetic practice.

The background of this rethinking of formalism arises from the disciplinary uncertainty in both literary criticism and cultural studies in the late twentieth century. Here, notions of form are used in *reaction* to the increasing marginality and indeterminacy of the 'literary' as a distinct disciplinary field, and/or a processual method of enquiry, and/or as a clearly defined object (Rooney 2000: 21; Lesjak 2013: 17). This is replicated in the discipline of cultural studies. Though suffering a similar disciplinary dilemma as literary studies, the strategy of cultural studies has been to resist aesthetic value and canon formation and therefore dismiss or conflate form with text, dismissing the resultant reduction as 'mere textualism'.

Reactions to such dilemmas involve what Marjorie Levinson identifies as a formalist movement seeking to redress a broadly, and variously-conceived, new historicism. This new historical moment, Levinson argues, 'treat[s] art-works as "bundles of historical and cultural content"' (2007: 562). This perception evolves from Ellen Rooney's contention that the attenuation of form in cultural criticism has led to 'the reduction of every text to its ideological or historical context, or to an exemplar of a prior theory (content) – form reduced to an epiphenomenon' (Rooney 2000: 26). Levinson's argument with Rooney is one of the meaning of historicism in the context of the return of form, and with the possibility that form is in essence a 'mystificatory' and ideologically suspect category of enquiry, and largely a work of revisionism and reinstitution (Levinson 2007: 561–65).

In surveying this debate, and in this context, Levinson goes on to carefully delineate an 'activist' formalism that seeks to recover form for its potentialities in enhancing a 'reduced' critical (content) practice, from a 'normative' formalism. Here, normative formalism is reactive, seeking to reinsert form as the 'something lost' to contextualising critical discourse, while upholding literature as a self-evident, affectual, aesthetically autonomous and expressive realm: the 'lost unities of bygone forms' (Levinson 2007: 559). I think this is a useful distinction that should persist beyond her eventual conflation of these two streams of formalism within her general critique. And it is one noted and taken up later by Carolyn Lesjak who rightly draws out this conservative 'normative' new formalism from Levinson's remarks as a marker of a broader disciplinary conservatism within literary studies.

Discussions like those involved in the role of form in literary criticism and cultural studies have their exemplars in creative writing. That is, the theoretical and critical discussion brought up by rethinking formalism is not merely of academic concern, but is evidenced in broader cultural and contextual practices of creative writing itself, where the formal questions foregrounded and mobilised by prose poetry, particularly as they relate to differing concepts of tradition and innovation, and the roles of criticism (or theory) and practice, are on display.

For example, the poetic movement of New Formalism (or new narrativism) in late twentieth-century USA drew attention to formal poetic structures ('metres, forms and narrative') in an attempt to revisit (if not revive) a traditional aesthetic and practice that was felt to be missing from a hegemonic, modernist, free verse poetry suspicious of formalism's constraints. The aim, according to the *Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry*, was to 'give back to American poetry a clarity, a music, and an objectivity which might make it accessible to a general audience' (Anon n.d.). This overtly 'traditional' project drew much criticism for its conservatism. Ira Sadoff, for example, suggests:

> When [the New Formalists] link pseudo-populism (the 'general reader') to regular meter, they disguise their nostalgia for moral and linguistic certainty, for a universal ('everyone agrees') and univocal way of conserving culture. Neoformalism shares with other contemporary poetic "movements" formal solutions to perceived weaknesses of American poetry. (Sadoff 1990)

Nonetheless, at the level of poetic practice, the reclamation of 'lost' formal techniques was achieved to the point where Mark Jarman is able to proclaim its complete integration into the poetic hegemony and reasserts its connections to traditions of verse:

> The currency and availability of and even desirability of writing in traditional English verse among poets, without having to draw special attention to doing so, is an accomplishment of the New Formalism … long after the innovations of Modernism, all poetry written in lines is in some form that has been received from a tradition. (Jarman 2015)

He goes on to suggest that this tendency is 'increasingly true of prose poetry', which I take to mean in its histories of the revival of the form as a reaffirmation of tradition over innovation.

Another example of a 'return of form', or the return of normative formalism, comes in the disciplinary discussions surrounding creative writing. Creative writing as an academic discipline is not literary or cultural criticism (though at its best it does involve the processes and knowledges of both of these), particularly in the institutional arrangements in my own country, Australia, where it is variously situated as one of the new humanities, the creative industries, or the institutionalisation of art practice akin to that of the visual or performing arts. Its uncertain and forming disciplinary status is sometimes seen as a site of innovative turns in the academy and the academic readjustment towards modes of creative intersections with the 'new' economy; or with the manifold possibilities of interdisciplinarity through considerations of practice. Or equally, it is marked by suspicion of the relative merits of teaching creative writing; or its research outcomes and processes are marked by suspicion as to their knowledge content, rigour and research value, particularly in relation to the modes of 'creative' or 'practice-led' research. Here the disciplinary narratives of creative practice in the academy come up against a whole range of largely unresolved questions about its methodologies, functions, and roles in the contemporary university. However, the criticism of theory in these struggles and debates often mirrors the debates that Carolyn Lesjak (echoing Levinson) identifies as being drawn by the 'normative' new formalism against theory in literary and cultural criticism: namely that contextualising or theorising reading somehow undermines its inherent potential for hedonic aesthetic

experience (Lesjak 2013: 18). Here we can supplant 'reading practice' by 'writing practice' to evoke similar ends.

This kind of critique not only pops up in the interminable discussion around whether creative writing can be taught, or is indeed worthy of academic attention, but in the overt criticism of the role theory plays in studies of writing, art and cultural practice generally. In his foreword to the recent *Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing,* Jonathan Bate overtly pitches the practice angle of creative writing studies, comparing it with the 'sister arts' of creative writing: music and visual art. Here creative writing can 'fill in the gap' left by critical literary studies where 'it is not usually demanded of literature students that they should be skilled in the literary equivalents of such techniques as playing a scale, composing a variation, sketching a nude' (Bate 2012: xvi).

Bate continues with the observation that 'the origins of English literary criticism belong within the realm of creativity, not that of academic analysis' (2012: xvi) before citing the long history of practitioner-critics who form criticism in English:

> Dryden developed his critical art not in an 'academic' context but in a creative one, that of the prefaces to, and essays about, his own plays and poems, in which he had self-consciously set about modernising and classicising English writing during the Restoration era. (2012: xvi)

And 'The figure who dominated literary debate in the public sphere in the second half of the eighteenth century was Dr Samuel Johnson, a journalist and all-round writer, *not a university teacher*' (2012: xvi; emphasis added). The implication is that this is the 'right' way to go about criticism: somehow as a result of intensely reflective practice, unswayed by anything other than the writer and the work. The spanner of theory somehow derailed all this:

> Writers became notoriously wary of theory: they found its jargon repellent and its reports of 'the death of the author' unacceptable. Theorists, in turn, were more interested in patterns and deep structures, ideological formations and hidden abysses, than writerly craft and judgement of 'literary' qualities. (Bate 2012: xvii)

It is such statements, in their conservative belief in timeless literary qualities, that post-war literary theory evolved to challenge. But this evolution is sidelined in Bate's narrative, by the 'sensible' reintroduction of creative practice into a new kind of 'colloquial' literary engagement unsullied by 'the latest theoretical *diktat*' (2012: xvii).

Of course, Bate never suggests that there might be more to the idea of the practitioner-critic theory of literary history than the happy accidents of blokes thinking about their writing; or that the rise of theory, and the rise of practice, might be more complex in their uptake and dissemination than a passing detour into faddism, and the consequent righting of some ship of 'literature'.

That this simplistic and conservative story of criticism and creativity, with its pitting of theory against practice reminiscent of FR Leavis's call to the 'organic community', could pass as a foreword to a major publisher's book on the subject of creative writing in the twenty-first century, speaks eloquently of the 'return of form' in the discipline of

creative writing, namely the return, as in so many cognate areas, of the 'normative' formalism identified by Levinson.

Prose poetics

So where does this leave a comparatively humble discussion around prose poetry, microfiction and form? These larger critical and disciplinary contexts are not irrelevant to what may seem a small argument around the relative merits of poetic language and the virtue of line breaks (or lack of them). The engagement with the challenges prose poetry provides to the norms of poetry and prose, and to form generally, as we have seen, are framed in ways that reveal much about the state of thinking around literature and creative writing.

I have endeavoured to identify two overarching narratives in the evolving discussions and reception of prose poetry from both a critical and practitioner's perspective namely: the critical narrative of revival of a tradition of prose poetry versus a largely practitioner-informed narrative of innovation, experiment and freedom; and how this feeds into larger critical debates and reactions to the role of theory in literary and cultural studies, versus the role of practice, the latter being particularly germane to the field of creative writing studies within the academy.

We can see that the discussion around prose poetry provides an entry into discussions of form, whether at the level of genre, language or definition, or as an entry to broader questions about the role and aims of criticism in the academy, the reception of practice via creative writing into academic discussions, and the general dismissal of theory in the face of 'normative' new formalism. Prose poetry, in its generic undecidability, its 'formless form', its subversive gestures, throws into relief ways that literature and writing are discussed in the contemporary mode.

For literary critics like Carolyn Lesjak and Vincent Leitch the return of form and the suspicion with which theory is currently held reveal a deeper conservatism within the academy, particularly in relation to humanities disciplines like literary criticism and cultural studies, 'The overarching message seems to be: scale back; pare down, small aims met are better than grand ones unrealized. Reclaim our disciplinary territory and hold onto it' (Lesjak 2013: 20). This also goes for newer disciplines like creative writing that, among other things, need to *claim* their territory in, as Leitch suggests, an increasingly corporatised and managerialised academy anxious about the role of critical thought (Leitch 2014). Here, calls to some version of common-sense regarding literary form and creative writing are regressive, denying as they do nearly a century of rethinking of what cultural and literary discussions might address. Trying to bluntly wedge prose poetry into a longer historical tradition without questioning the reasons for its revival, or its contemporary story of innovation seems one way this happens.

Another is to neglect the prose side of this convergence, and thereby reaffirm unthinkingly the value of poetry over prose. However, equally damaging are the 'cut and paste' theoretical fixations, where content is adjusted to reified theoretical categories that neglect theory as form, and overlay preconceived and largely unexamined templates onto variant social and cultural formations. This is sometimes

the case in creative writing research, and belies an anxiety about its role as research and its relationship to practice.

If nothing else, thinking about prose poetry marshals these forces into view, and suggests broader questions that I feel should be addressed beyond its relevance to literary function. If prose poetry is a subversive form, as Michael Delville suggests, surely this must mean more than as a generic outlier or modifier, limited to aesthetic or textual scrutiny. This is to take up the second category of Levinson's schema of the return of formalism: activist formalism. Activist formalism takes thinking about form as a cue for rethinking the artwork in its historical framework. That is, not in a historicist recounting of literary histories, but, to paraphrase Levinson, that the determination of a work's content comprises part of the critical process (Levinson 2007: 561). This is not to suggest the timelessness of the category of form, either. But that form is subject to change and practice, and must be engaged with in and through content as much as the reverse.

I have tried to suggest, however briefly, some of the paths this discussion might take in relation to prose poetry. For example, the relative concurrence of short form writing and prose poetry in the USA in the late 1980s and 1990s; or the reaction to the introduction of new personal forms of technology and communication through this period; or the resurgence in the form again in the current moment in Australia and the UK; or its relationships with practice and criticism in the academy, particularly in relation to the revival of aesthetics, variants of affect and other rethinking of the 'pleasures of the text.' What is meant by practitioner's 'freedom' in this context? These questions are suggestive and preliminary, but indicate a politics of form seeking to open, or perhaps merely abide by, the promise of the subversiveness of prose poetry.

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