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**The borderlines of poetry**

Abstract:

Where does poetry end and prose begin? What is a prose poem? What aesthetic, ideological and marketing purposes are fulfilled when we call things by certain names? Is the very act of calling a piece of prose a ‘poem’ enough to make a prose poem or have prose poets in fact developed certain compositional strategies meant to erase accepted distinctions between literary genres and expand the range of formal possibilities of poetry? If that is the case, are we speaking of contemporary poetry as a seamless continuum liable to be transgressed by the inherently subversive potential of prose poetry? This paper addresses some of the above questions with reference to the state and status of the prose poem in Australia. It argues that the prose poem questions boundaries between creative and critical material whilst negotiating between notions of a public language of prose and a marginal language of poetry. It also suggests that prose poetry enacts particularly complex modes of engagement between subjectivity and the world.

Biographical Note:

Dominique Hecq is Senior Lecturer and Research Leader in Writing at Swinburne University of Technology’s Faculty of Higher Education. She has published in the areas of literary studies, translation, creative writing, psychoanalysis, and pedagogy. With Russell Grigg and Craig Smith, she co-authored *Female Sexuality: The Early Psychoanalytic Controversies*. Dominique Hecq is also the author of *The Book of Elsa* (a novel), *Magic, Mythfits* and *Noisy Blood* (fiction), *The Gaze of Silence*, *Good Grief*, *Couchgrass* (poetry) as well as two short plays (*One Eye Too Many*, and *Cakes & Pains*), performed respectively in 2001 and 2004. Her most recent award is The Martha Richardson Medal for poetry (2006). She was short-listed for the inaugural Blake Prize for Poetry (2008) and highly commended in its second year. *Out of Bounds* (Re.press) is her latest book of poems.

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The distinction between poetry and prose must be a technical distinction; and further refinement of both poetry and prose can only draw the distinction more clearly.

T. S. Eliot, 'The Borderline of Prose'

Some years ago I became interested in the prose poem. Not prose and not poetry, the prose poem is a borderline genre, in that it moves on the edge of both. Perhaps this is why some prefer to call it a 'form' (Scott 1991) or 'mode' (Clements and Dunham 2009: 1). However, not only is the prose poem, as the name implies, a synthesis of poetry and prose, it is the embodiment of a continuing irresolution of the two opposing terms that constitute it (Monroe 1987). The French poet Charles Baudelaire encapsulates the complexity of this irresolution when 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 pages on conscience' (Baudelaire 1969 [1861]: 25). While some critics deplore this irresolution for being 'oxymoronic' (Sanchez 2009: 175), others find it rather seductive (Lehman 1996). Like definitions, though, evaluations often defeat purpose. Here is indeed not the place to rehearse the debate ignited in the United States over forty years ago by an influential essay (Plumly 1978) about what Marjorie Perloff has called 'the linear fallacy' (Perloff 1981), for as Terry Eagleton reminds us, this debate does not seem to have ever been put out (2007: 26).

Nevertheless, my purpose all those years ago was more specifically to learn something about the Australian prose poem. I had assumed that our university library housed an anthology of Australian prose poems. It would, I had also assumed, begin with Henry Handel Richardson's 'Proem' from *Australia Felix*, Book one of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (Richardson 1930) and its final chapter would predominantly figure works by women, such as Susan Hampton (1981), Anna Couani (1990), Moya Costello (1994), Alison Croggon (1996) and Joanne Burns (1981; 2004). In the library, however, there was nothing on the Australian prose poem. I decided to visit Collected Works, Melbourne's best stocked bookshop in things poetic. I asked its owner if he had a book on the Australian prose poem. Nothing. He directed me to the only book on prose poetry he had on the shelves: *Great American Prose Poems from Poe to the Present* (Lehman 2003). And so I began to approach the Australian prose poem via The United States rather than via *fin de siècle* France, for as I thought I knew since my late teens, and as Kevin Brophy points out in a paper published in *TEXT*, 'the prose poem arrived as a new self-proclaimed literary form in France through Charles Baudelaire with his 1861 collection, *Petits Poèmes en Prose*' (Brophy 2002). Incidentally, the term was first coined in a 1831 British magazine's 'exuberant paen to the possibilities of poetic prose years before anyone actually set out to write pieces self-consciously conceived as "prose poems"' (Clements and Dunham 2009: 1).

I mention Brophy's paper not only because it elicited interesting responses in *TEXT*'s 'Letters to the editor' section, but mainly because it uncovered Tom Shapcott's 1982 interview with Deakin's literary magazine, *Mattoïd* [reprinted in *Biting the Bullet* (Shapcott 1990) and later in *TEXT* (Shapcott 2002)]. Shapcott's interview discusses

the prose poem's origins in France, its fortunes across several languages and continents. It also offers some insightful comments on the nature of the Australian prose poem. As this short piece attests, Australia has effectively 'an achieved body of work in this form' (Shapcott 2002: 7). This body now includes a considerable number of book-length collections. Except for Alex Skovron's *Autographs* (2008), most book-length collections were actually marketed as poetry: Andrew Taylor's *Parabolas* (1976) Shapcott's own *Turning Full Circle* (1979) and *Stump & Grape & Bopple-Nut* (1981), Bruce Beaver's *Headlands* (1986), Gary Catalano's *Fresh Linen*, (1988), Laurie Duggan's *The Ash Range* (1987) right up to Marion May Campbell's *Fragments from a Paper Witch* (2009). Bruce Beaver's *As It Was* (1971), on the other hand, was marketed as autobiography, while Tom Shapcott's *White Stag of Exile* (1984) and Ania Walwicz' *Red Roses* (1992), were marketed as fiction. Though the body of critical work is still lacking, Marion Campbell's *Fragments from a Paper Witch* presents a deconstruction of the form of the prose poem. I will therefore select it in order to approach the borderlines of poetry in recent Australian writing.

But let us first turn to Bob Perelman in order to briefly rehearse the question of generic boundaries while limiting our discussion. With reference to Perelman's poem 'The Marginalization of Poetry' (Perelman, 1996), I contend that prose poetry now questions boundaries between creative and critical material through negotiating between notions of a public language of prose and a marginal language of poetry, thereby also enacting particularly complex modes of engagement between subjectivity and the world:

...every poem, is a marginal  
work in a quite literal sense.  
Prose poems are another matter: but  
since they identify themselves as poems  
through style and publication context, they  
become a marginal subset of poetry,  
in other words, doubly marginal  
(Perelman 1996)

Can we, then, have verse without prose, prose without the use of paragraphs, poetry without the use of lines, metaphors and repetitions? What aesthetic, ideological and marketing purposes are served when we begin to call things by certain names? Does the very fact of calling a piece of prose a 'poem' suffice to create a prose poem or have prose poets effectively developed a number of specific compositional strategies meant to erase accepted distinctions between literary genres and expand the range of formal possibilities of contemporary poetry? If that is the case, are we speaking of contemporary poetry as a seamless continuum liable to be transgressed by the inherently subversive potential of the genre? Or, is the prose poem in the process of becoming another genre with its own methods, conventions, and trendy traits?

These are some of the questions Bob Perelman addresses in 'The Marginalization of Poetry,' a text first published as a poem in the collection, *Virtual Reality* (1993) and later reprinted in the book of criticism, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (1996). The piece begins with Jack Spicer's famous line, 'No one listens to poetry,' and proceeds to investigate the literal, metaphorical, and ideological implications of the 'margin.' The very form of Perelman's text, a 1,500

word critical essay written in prose and arbitrarily divided into 125 six-word per line couplets, is an ironic comment on the transgressive power of experimental writing, a gesture the author was later to define as an attempt to ‘foreground the dash between poetry and prose, academia and poetry’ (Perelman 1997: 38). Central to this project is the influence of Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s work may be said to be emblematic of what is in part the purpose of ‘The Marginalization of Poetry,’ that of dissolving the border between critical and poetic language: Derrida’s multiple-margin collage, *Glas* (1974), indeed seeks to challenge accepted distinctions between ‘literary’ and ‘philosophical’ texts while simultaneously forcing us to revise our understanding of those distinctions. Perelman’s poem ends with a call for ‘a more / communal and critical reading and writing . . . not some / genreless, authorless writing, but a physically and socially located writing where margins are not metaphors, and where readers are not simply there, waiting to / be liberated.’ Only ‘a self-critical poetry,’ Perelman concludes, ‘minus the / short-circuiting rhetoric of vatic privilege, might / dissolve the antinomies of marginality that / broke Jack Spicer into broken lines’ (Perelman 1993: 10). Perelman’s playful ending corroborates Marjorie Perloff’s conclusion to an important paper titled ‘The Linear Fallacy’, where she notes that the line break, so central to free verse in its early manifestations in the twentieth century, no longer has the semantic function it used to exercise in poetry (Perloff 1981:856).

The prose poem, perhaps more than any other poetic form, has long been involved in a systematic critique of its own formal and ideological foundations as well as of the relationship between reader and work. In the hands of its most innovative practitioners, it has also helped to question the binary thinking that draws a clear-cut line between creative and critical material while undermining what Perelman describes as the ‘Manichean model of / a prosy command-center of criticism and / unique bivouacs on the poetic margins’ (Perelman 1993: 8). As Michel Delville has shown in *The American Prose Poem*, the issue of functional negotiations between verse and prose forms can be profitably extended to the question of whether generic, functional or modal (and not merely structural) categories like ‘poetry’ or the ‘lyric’ can reclaim other genres, functions and modes which have come to be associated more or less exclusively with prose (Delville 1998). If that is the case, the prose poem as subversive form also argues for the coexistence of simultaneous and heterogeneous spaces in the mode of (re)presentation itself and, indirectly, for the reintegration of poetry into a larger spectrum of literary and extra-literary contexts.

Because of its constant oscillation between the literal and metaphorical margins (and marginalities) foregrounded by Perelman’s poem, the prose poem form has been used by poets in order to capture the contradictions, but also the possible negotiations, between the ‘public,’ utilitarian language of prose and what is often perceived as the oppositional and marginal status of poetic language in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The work of, Henri Michaux, Francis Ponge and Anne Carson immediately spring to mind, as does the work of many language poets. Rosemarie Waldrop’s collection *Lawn of Excluded Middle* (1993), a poetic extension of Wittgenstein’s project that aims to ‘make language with its ambiguities the ground of philosophy’ (unpag.), is a case in point. One of the most innovative features of Waldrop’s text is its willingness to integrate many different discourses from areas such as philosophy,

science, narrative, and the lyric. More recently, Hélène Cixous' *Hyperdream* appeared in English. The book is advertised as a novel, and yet it is clearly a polygeneric work of mourning for the narrator's mother and for Derrida, as well as a homage to Benjamin written in Cixous' characteristically self-searching prose poetry.

It is a similar polygeneric impulse that we find at the heart of *Fragments of a Paper Witch* (Campbell 2009). However, the effect achieved by Campbell is different from the effects achieved by Waldrop and Cixous. Whereas Waldrop and Cixous playfully and critically appropriate the discourse of philosophy and science and undermine it from within, Campbell does so from both within and without. If, as *Lawn of Excluded Middle* appropriates Wittgenstein's philosophical formulations and challenges *from within* the logical, syllogistic authority of expository prose by confronting it with the changing psychic terrain displayed by a consciousness that is using all its rhetorical vigour to keep up with the 'accelerating frame' of a post-Newtonian world that is 'edging away and out of reach' (Waldrop 1993: 67) in a series of short prose poems, Campbell foregrounds and performs the polygeneric quality of the prose poem. In fact, she flaunts her defiance of all universal and universalising paradigms, suggesting that scientific knowledge has its origin in the feminine realm. The self-reflexive opening paragraph of the book's eponymous piece illustrates how Campbell's prose poetry simultaneously breaks down traditional genre distinctions while highlighting the poetic as the art of making:

Katerina Kepler's son, Johannes, wrote a story and sent it off to amuse his learned friends—it was a voyage to the moon. Mother motor—she earned herself a reputation as the force behind his fictive ship, from which he'd seen how pocked the lunar surface was and marvelled more than Galileo. They said she summoned less ambitious demons for transport to more local shores. She had honed her techniques: she had polished the rod and lubricated the brush. Exhibit One: the broom behind the kitchen door. *Fioxilde of Iceland*, Johannes has called her in the arctic circle of his story, from whence she had him dream of tropics, of warmth beyond the reach of any words. That was how the magical boy had heard of music, got the connections. The learned friends scribbled notes to the inquisitors. The inquisitors' messenger could read Fioxhilde of Iceland all right. That's no story boy. Exhibit two: the herbs laid out on your mother's racks to dry. We know the old lady isn't picking for her vases. She brews her herbs quite cannily and sells these concoctions to the unsuspecting sailor, sending him off course.

Later, in another world, in broad daylight, you walk into the mystery.  
(Campbell 2009: 49)

Unlike many language poets, Campbell writes 'Fragments' in a relatively straightforward prose, at least on a formal, syntactic level that apes the detached tone of scientific data write-up, thereby preserving a certain amount of syntactic and narrative control, even as it tries to integrate the seemingly competing spheres of speculative and poetic discourses. This particular piece results in a kind of writing that refuses to aestheticise itself: a poetry grounded in an engagement with the materiality of language that pays critical homage to the victim of science, namely Kepler's mother, who was incarcerated for being accused of witchery. 'He's made me' says

Kepler's Mother in Campbell's text, 'a paper witch with his stories' (49). The 'he', as Elizabeth Holdsworth aptly points out, is not identified. It could be the son. It could also be the inquisitor. But it could also be the Other responsible for the swarm, the mass of words 'he' puts in your mouth when the author has Lady Chamberlain say as an aside: 'You say it quietly: the dingo took my baby' (Campbell 2009: 49), and indeed 'he' whose 'texts become you' (Campbell 2009:148).

It is not the gender-inflected polygeneric quality which makes Campbell's essay 'Fragments from a Paper Witch' a 'prose poem'. As suggested above, the mixing of different genres and styles per se is by no means the privilege of poetry written in prose. Nor is it the province of women. Pound's *Cantos* (1987 [1922]) comes to mind, not to mention many recent poetry collections made up of interwoven lyrics, stories, newspaper cuts or even drawings and photographs. What makes Campbell's piece—and in fact the whole book, a prose poem is precisely that it does not confine itself to mixing or juxtaposing antipodal modes and registers, but implodes and explodes each genre we encounter in the book. Her deconstruction of genre in *Fragments from a Paper Witch* becomes a generative device: it creates a formal structure whose rules of composition are externalised so that the apparent lack of constraint is not only a rule, but a thematic property of the text as well. Indeed, *Fragments* comprises autofictional fragments that draw on the forms of myth, fable, bestiary, essay, lyric, (auto)criticism, prose poetry, dialogue dramatic monologue and on the art of translation. It also contains a contemporary version of *Antigone*, the play 'The Half-Life of Creonite' in the spirit of Anouilh's play (1987 [1942]) or Cocteau's remaking of *Orpheus* (1995 [1926]).

Perhaps the body of the work would best be defined as prose poetry in the making. Like Cixous and Waldrop, Campbell conveys here the particulars of subjective experience in a way that accounts for the geometries of language, body and self and combines them in an alternate, less linear logic. The constant shifts from the general to the particular, the abstract to the sensuous, the metaphorical to the literal, need to be understood in the context of Waldrop's proposition that 'we have to pass from explanation to description in the heroic hope that it will reach right into experience' (Waldrop 1993: 74). Except that Campbell's self-reflexive language constantly reminds the reader of her cultural and critical heritage as is made obvious in 'i of the swarm', with its 'prose swarming with the words of others' (Campbell 2009: 150).

The result of her meditations on the principle of indeterminacy or irresolution in *Fragments from a Paper Witch* reads like Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* (1978) translated by Cixous into a Poundian 'dance of the intellect' that allows the self to struggle against the uncertainty of fact inherent in a post-Keplerian model of the universe white tapping into Mallarmé's poetic vision, postmodern poetics and (post)-structuralist theory. Take the title 'i of the swarm', for instance, with its gesturing to the French *essaim* (pronounced [esɛ̃] thus conjuring 'the one'), an equivocation exploited by Mallarmé, Lacan, Barthes, and Derrida. Campbell's investigation of the contradictions and paradoxes that undermine the consistency and authority of logical thinking invalidates what Bernstein once condemned as the anachronistic assumption that 'philosophy is involved with system building and consistency and poetry with the beauty of language and emotion' (Bernstein 1986: 218). In this sense, the boundaries

of genre and form are, in Gail Jones' words, 'finally less real than the ardour it flexibly promotes (Campbell 2009: ix).

Campbell's 'ardour' is at the root of 'the occasion of writing she calls *vagabondage*, a restless journeying between different registers and modes, an impulsive bestirring' (Campbell 2009: ix). As such it is a desire to write 'literary incitements' (Campbell 2009: ix) that bridge the gulf between poetry and other discourses diachronically as well as synchronically across fields of expertise, including the discourses of science as in the eponymous piece 'Fragments of a Paper Witch', and the discourses of medicine and the law as in 'The Half-Life of Creonite'. The point here is clearly not to import the authority of scientific culture into poetry via myth, but to explore the metaphorical and cultural possibilities to highlight the idiosyncrasy and validity of poetic knowledge.

While writers like Marion Campbell push the borders of poetic language by transcending the traditional, yet artificial, split between poetry, philosophy and science, other Australian poets have written collections of prose poems which take the form of fables, parables, or 'short short stories'. Indeed, as the last paragraph of the first part of this paper suggests, the possibility of reclaiming for poetry the storytelling functions of narrative fiction has gained popularity in Australia since the late seventies.

This interest in rethinking what makes storytelling possible in poetry refers back to a tradition of self-reflexive fables which, from Max Jacob to Jorge Luis Borges, Henri Michaux, Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar, John Barth and beyond, has put the emphasis on the telling of the tale rather than on the tale itself. It also refers back to the experiments of Samuel Beckett and Burroughs, sometimes also Georges Bataille Francis Ponge and Marcel Duchamp. Justin Clemens' *Black River*, for instance, which appeared in the self-proclaimed anomalous series of Re-press, purports to be 'the autobiography of a nonexistent personage' (Clemens 2007 unpag). The text by Clemens is supplemented with surreal photographic art by Helen Johnson. The idea, evidenced in Campbell's work, that poetry and philosophy involve commitments that are both dissimilar and complementary is also reflected in this work, which integrates literary theory, literary experimentation, urbane wit, black humour, metapoetic playfulness and rhetorical sophistication with the raw energies of surrealism on the brink of disintegration. The immediate impression in reading Clemens' piece is one of rhetorical control and intellectual authority, and yet the overall sense of indeterminacy present in many pieces contained in *Black River* often seems to undermine the text's aspirations to rationality and seriousness. Out of that dialectic of self-deflating authority the text becomes a form of shared play: prose-poetry imbued by the cadences of iambic pentameters, one that allows imaginative open-endedness and censures it by its formal authority to deflect the powerful affects of angst and disgust induced by some of its images (both in Clemens's text and Johnson's images). While the prose displays the influence of French masters of the prose poem such as Jacob and Breton, it also gestures towards Beckett's *Murphy* (1938) and Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1982 [1928]). Paradoxically, however, the importance of parody and humour in this dystopic narrative allies Clemens with fiction writers who, like Brian Castro,

have mastered the art of being incisive, unsentimental, funny and lyrical at the same time.

A comprehensive survey of the different uses to which the prose poem format has been put in Australia since it first arrived in *Australia Felix* would have to consider an extremely broad spectrum of forms and methods ranging from Henry Handel Richardson's naturalism to the streetwise philosophical lyricism of John Tranter and Justin Clemens, the speculative sensuousness of Ania Walwicz's *Red Roses* (1992), or Michael Farrell's alliteration- and pun-ridden Steinian forays into style. Despite their many differences, however, all the examples cited or briefly discussed here implicitly propose a definition of 'poetic' language which is neither based on stylistic decorativeness and sophistication, nor on a mere sense of lyric intimacy. Because of its tendency to accommodate and appropriate antithetical genres and discourses, prose poetry indeed offers a useful alternative to the aporia of lyric discourse, and it is hardly surprising that many poets have used the form to expand—rather than reject—the possibilities of subjective modes of expression. Indeed, many seek to absorb all levels of experience and continue to enact the engagement between consciousness and world.

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