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Mary Ann Caws and Michel Delville

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THE PROSE POEM

EDITED BY MARY ANN CAWS
AND MICHEL DELVILLE

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PREFACE

Rosemary Lloyd

Paris, 1968. In my memory a time not just of political revolution, but also, and for me more vitally, of an upheaval in my thinking about genres. Our tutor in the “Cours de civilisation française pour les étrangers” sets before us two passages which she insists are “des poèmes en prose,” one by Baudelaire, one by Ponge. My initial reaction is revolt: how can these two passages, set out like short stories (very short short stories) without apparent rhyme and rhythm, possibly be poetry? Poetry is surely all about the beauty of predictable sound patterns balancing and enhancing beautiful images. Then I start reading, and I notice, to my amazement, that there is rhythm, that there are rhymes, that these pieces, for reasons I can’t yet explain (still can’t satisfactorily explain), are not short stories but something else, a mixed form that clearly offers a potential I hadn’t yet seen. Irony, sarcasm, humour, even the transformation of the banal experience of rain, things I hadn’t before associated with poetry, all seem possible in this new form. I rush back to my attic room in Neuilly and try it for myself, with results that I hurl into the wastepaper bin in fury.

I reread the passages from class. Baudelaire’s is “Chacun sa chimère,” chimères being for me the stone statues on Notre Dame, beautiful in their grotesque rejection of the classical beauty of statues, powerful in their suggestion of both wit and evil. In Baudelaire’s poem, the heavy rhythm of feet tramping across the great dusty plain, the alliterations that suggest a constantly repeating scenery, the unexpected image of the men bent over under the weight of their own personal chimeras leap out at me from a passage whose lack of the expected structure had initially made me reject the idea that poetry might be present in it. The sentence structure repeats and echoes the sound and feel of the great claws crushing the unsuspecting person carrying their individual chimera. One sentence in particular seized my attention:

Tous ces visages fatigues et sérieux ne témoignaient d’aucun désespoir; sous la coupole splénétique du ciel, les pieds plongés dans la poussière d’un sol aussi désolé que ce ciel, ils cheminaient avec la physionomie résignée de ceux qui sont condamnés à espérer toujours. (Baudelaire 1975: 283)

The word games (*sol, désolé*), the repeating sound patterns (*pieds, plongés, poussière*), the inescapable rhythms (*résignée, condamnés, espérer*) and the overturning of Dante’s

line ordering all who enter Hell to abandon hope (Baudelaire's people are "condamnés à espérer toujours"—so much worse) all shook my previously-held conviction that I knew what poetry was.

Although its subject matter was immediately familiar, the prose poem by Francis Ponge, "Pluie," was more problematic. The first sentence seemed banal to the point of pedestrianism: "La pluie, dans la cour où je la regarde tomber, descend à des allures très diverses" (Ponge 2006: 31–2). But then I began to notice word games even more playful and revealing than Baudelaire's. The rain forms a *rideau* or *réseau*, the deadpan narrator's voice informs us, releasing the word for water from nouns that would normally be resistant to that element. The precipitation is wittily described as sempiternal, the rain drops are transformed into wheat, peas, marbles, candy. The letter "i" in *brise*, *rejaillit*, *aiguillettes*, *brillantes* reflects the bouncing droplets, and the complicated mechanism Ponge invokes to describe the rainfall becomes at the same time a metaphor for the prose poem itself, "une horlogerie dont le ressort est la pesanteur d'une masse donnée de vapeur en précipitation" or "un concert sans monotonie, non sans délicatesse." And both the expression "glou-glou des gouttières" and the pun in "Il a plu" insist that poetry can be funny without losing the charisma I associated with it.

Over the half century that has, unbelievably, passed since that first encounter, I have spent many hours delighting in, grappling with, and revolting against prose poetry (what, after all, is the use of revolt that is not periodically rekindled?). Teaching it has enabled me to see again and again that same rejection followed by gradual and sometimes only partial acceptance. In the essays that follow, readers will be able to explore prose poetry not just in many of its guises, but also across languages and countries and through time. They reveal the extent to which prose poetry, to quote Ponge, offers us an "amphibiguité" that is consistently "salubre" (Ponge 2006: 33).

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