

Studies in Prose Poetry: Tate, Carson, and Wenderoth

Jonathan “Luke” Laubhan

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington
2013

Committee:
Andrew Feld
Pimone Triplett

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:
English

© Copyright 2013

Jonathan “Luke” Laubhan

Two years ago, when I enrolled in the University of Washington MFA program, I wasn't planning on becoming a poet whose work primarily inhabits the blurred space between poetry and prose, or a prose writer specializing in genre-bending forms like literary collage and flash fiction. I simply planned on learning, reading, and writing as much as possible, and I anticipated I'd mature as a writer. My experience in the program hasn't just improved my poetic technique or galvanized my voice, though – it's certainly done that – it's also expanded my understanding of what I, as a writer, can make language do. I've been exposed to new ideas and been given the opportunity to experiment. My experimentation, in turn, has been girded by increased knowledge of forms, rhetoric, genres, even grammar and syntax. The result is my emerging personal aesthetic, a style that both stimulates me and channels my talent into writing that mirrors in its amorphous shape the ambiguities of my perspective and subject matter. I *am* maturing, and as it turns out, I'm some kind of blended-genre animal.

Before turning to this essay's textual analysis, a few examples of other texts I've recently enjoyed can provide additional context. In Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, prose poems reshaped into poignant, prose-style paragraphs tell a story through 240 threaded propositions. While the book's unusual structure is intriguing, Nelson's language is captivating: straightforward but occasionally lyrical, full of research anecdotes but tonally...*blue*. In Joshua Beckman's *Your Time Has Come*, spare two-, three-, and four-line poems recall Archilochus's fragments (e.g. "A Filipino freighter / filled the city / with Filipino stuff"). These words, stripped of most poetic devices, convey complicated ideas and images poetically. In *The Man Suit*, Zachary Schomburg renders a coherent vision of reality through a mix of surreal prose poems, lineated verse, and interludes that make little sense unless

one considers *The Man Suit* without them. Among the other writers who've augmented my notion of what's possible are Eduardo Galeano, Mark Strand, C.K. Williams, Russell Edson, Renata Adler, Richard Siken, Francis Ponge, Sarah Manguso, and Charles Simic.

James Tate, Anne Carson, and Joe Wenderoth are poets, first and foremost; Anne Carson endows everything she writes with a poetic hue. At the same time, all three write conventional poetry, prose poetry, and essays, and are perhaps best known for work that defies traditional categorization. I will examine James Tate's "Distance from Loved Ones," a prose poem that represents most fully the criteria often employed to characterize prose poetry, to introduce applicable definitions and categories. Carson's *Plainwater*, on the other hand, embodies the spectrum of prose poetry and poetic prose, from writing that's not poetry, but sounds like it, to pieces that look like poems, but don't feel like it. I will briefly analyze each of the five sections of *Plainwater*, addressing how they function or do not function as poetry. Last, I'll study two poems from Wenderoth's *Letters to Wendy's*. These epistles mostly lack poetic features; as such, they represent the kind of prose poetry that's only identifiable at a fundamental level. With each writer, I will supplement analysis with thoughts on how the work relates to my own. By no means is this essay exhaustive, but taken as a whole, it's reflective of where I see myself within literary and poetic tradition.

I. James Tate, "Distance from Loved Ones"

Distance from Loved Ones

After her husband died, Zita decided to get the face-lift she had always wanted. Half-way through the operation her blood pressure started to drop, and they had to stop.

When Zita tried to fasten her seat-belt for her sad drive home, she threw-out her shoulder. Back at the hospital the doctor examined her and found cancer run rampant throughout her shoulder and arm and elsewhere. Radiation followed. And, now, Zita just sits there in her beauty parlor, bald, crying and crying.

My mother tells me all this on the phone, and I say: Mother, who is Zita?

And my mother says, I am Zita. All my life I have been Zita, bald and crying. And you, my son, who should have known me best, thought I was nothing but your mother.

But, Mother, I say, I am dying...

The surreal, humorous nature of much of James Tate's poetry contains attributes that characterize many prose poems, including some of my own. Prose poetry lacks the line break as a tool for generating pace and tension, so, the poet must find another way to manage these effects. Frequently, the solution comes "via surrealistic anti-logic, bizarre narrative, lushness of language, innovative structure, or experiments with grammar and syntax" (Clements 4). In other words, the prose poem often gets a bit weird, thereby forcing the reader's mind to remain alert. In that sense, Tate is a master.

See, for example, how Tate employs temporal and perspectival shifts in "Distance from Loved Ones." The poem begins with an occasion of death that foreshadows and links the poem's ultimate line. The poet provides no information about either death; in the case of the former, the lack of context leads the reader to immediately wonder exactly how Zita's husband died. One clause into the poem, there's already tension. That clause in particular ("After her husband died") establishes a timeline. *X happened, and then Zita got a facelift.* The poem proceeds chronologically, as though the poet's relaying a story from start to finish – an operation, the drive, a return to the hospital, radiation, the beauty parlor – when Tate suddenly throws all narrative askew by reframing events in the context of 'just another story Mom was telling me on the phone.' The sentence "My Mother

tells me all this...” scrambles the reader’s heretofore unchallenged assumption of what the poem is about; it’s no longer a poem about a random “Zita,” this poem is about the speaker, his mother, and relational disconnect. Tate subtly switches from past to present tense as the poem morphs into a deeply personal dialogue between son and mother. This changing landscape raises the stakes, mirrors the paradigm shift experienced by both characters, and ultimately, unsettles the reader.

Likewise, Tate elects not to use quotation marks, a non-conventional grammatical move that further clouds the conversation taking place. The lack of quotations provides just a hint of possibility that this dialogue is occurring entirely in the mind of the speaker. I don’t think that’s what’s happening here, though I believe the poet intentioned that ambiguity. On the subject of grammar and syntax, it’s also worth noting how Tate employs clauses, and especially commas, to pace the poem. Again, without line breaks, a poorly-written prose poem might read like any other paragraph of prose: an entry in the encyclopedia, the promotional information on the side of a can of corn. Many other devices exist for speeding, slowing, and stopping language in a prose poem, though. Note the first two sentences: “After her husband died, Zita decided to get the face-lift she had always wanted. Half-way through the operation her blood pressure started to drop, and they had to stop.” These sentences are chiasmic: one six-syllable clause, followed a 16-syllable one, then a period; a 16-syllable clause, followed by a five-syllable one, then a period. The effect is a kind of jaunty, understated rhythm that runs counter to the events being described. The sentence construction also produces and relieves tension, accordingly. After the short introductory clause, two longer independent clauses exhaust the reader’s breath, before the comma after “drop,” acting as a de facto line break, allows the reader

to inhale. The poet breaks the pattern, though, almost as soon as it's established; later, in separate instances, Tate employs an abundance of commas to manufacture a different effect: "And, now, Zita just sits there in her beauty parlor, bald, crying and crying...But, Mother, I say, I am dying..." In the first sentence, Tate inserts four commas, two after the first two words alone. In the second sentence, only seven words long, Tate uses four commas, each one building anticipation for the seminal revelation. In both sentences, the result is a slowing of the poem's pace; the syntax serves to emphasize the poem's most affecting moments. Tate's varied use of clauses and commas suggest keen awareness of the reader's reaction to grammatical cues. It's one way, in addition to creating a surreal poem, to energize the material and engage the reader.

As for humor, Tate demonstrates a masterful comic touch. "Distance from Loved Ones" isn't as funny as, say, "The List of Famous Hats" or "How the Pope Is Chosen." In "Distance from Loved Ones," comedy is subdued by tragedy; the poem's humor barely escapes a first line riddled with sadness: a husband's death, a melancholy, regrettably named woman rebuilding herself. Then again, the very nature of comedy lies in the inevitability and universality of the tragic. There's something about the terror of existence that makes one either run screaming to the hills or shrug and chuckle. By focusing immediately on a surreal but entirely feasible bad situation, Tate leads the reader into a raw emotional space. As Zita's life goes from bad to worse, the reader's only response is to commiserate, perhaps smile, and wait for the punch line. It's interesting here to read Bin Ramke's account of hearing Tate read "Distance from Loved Ones" shortly after its composition, prior to its publication, to an audience familiar with Tate's lighter material. The crowd laughs at each sentence but grows increasingly somber as the poem turns. Ramke

concludes: “This poem, and...the reading...was an attempt (conscious or otherwise) to silence – to subvert the laughter, to make us a little ashamed of laughing, to make us a little ashamed of thinking we know where we were going, what we were hearing” (Ramke 106). Tate composed the poem in such a way that it presents a laughable digression of events while simultaneously undermining the expectation that there *is* a punch line. The result is a kind of true-to-life humor that resonates more than mere thigh-slapping jokes or bizarre scenes.

Ultimately, Tate’s blend of temporal and perspectival shifts, syntactic techniques, and gallows humor coalesce into a piece with pace, tension, and energy. In those ways, Tate creates something poetic and compensates for the lack of line breaks. But without them, what else characterizes “Distance from Loved Ones” as a poem, not just lyrical prose? For that matter, what distinguishes any prose *poem* as such?

Unfortunately, there is no singular explanation, no absolute parameters that outline what prose poetry is and isn’t. The most renowned, artful attempt at defining prose poetry comes from the genre’s attributed progenitor, Charles Baudelaire himself (though Baudelaire’s notion of prose poetry was influenced by Aloysius Bertrand’s earlier work), in a letter to Arsène Houssaye introducing *Paris Spleen*: “Which one of us, in his moments of ambition, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience” (Baudelaire IX). This explanation of what prose poetry is – or more accurately, might become – suggests a style of writing characterized by poetic devices, but lacking the trappings of thoroughly Modern verse. Baudelaire’s idea of prose poetry is based foremost on opportunity, the

possibility of a writing style with new capabilities. That such a genre reacts against the conventions of the time is secondary. “The prose poem’s form isn’t a negative space, rather it’s a positive one, a space populated with the elements of poetry – imagery, music, lyricism, metaphor, simile, alliteration, assonance, and so on – and dependent, though not wholly, on them... There are fewer traditional rules and governances, but otherwise, the prose poem is, like its lineated cousins, simply a form of poetry” (McDowell XVIII).

That’s well and good, but the subversion of expectations, the refusal of definition, and inherent ambiguity does much more than characterize prose poetry – it *is* prose poetry. “The prose poem questions such genre distinctions and raises issues about the human desire to distance, categorize, and control rather than engage” (McDowell 76). Further, “by testing the validity of our assumptions concerning the nature and function of both poetic and prosaic language, the prose poem inevitably leads us to investigate a number of specific postulates underlying the act of defining genres and, above all, of tracing boundaries between them” (Delville 10). These descriptions recall Ramke’s experience hearing Tate read “Distance from Loved Ones.” Although the prose poem might function initially as merely more expansive means of expression – a positive space, the miracle of poetic prose, if you will – it simultaneously represents a kind of rebellion against what’s normal. The prose poem doesn’t just rely on strangeness to create necessary rhetorical effects; by its nature, the prose poem is an odd effect itself.

In these ways, it’s clear “Distance from Loved Ones” measures up as prose poetry. The poem isn’t verse or lineated, yet it does trace the “undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience.” In certain moments, it feels subtly lyrical. And it subverts expectations and calls into question, through its content and its form, genre distinctions. I’ll pose the ques-

tion again, though: what does the poem do poetically, specifically? What techniques and effects does the poem demonstrate, in addition to those to which I've alluded (rhetoric, figurative language, the creative use of grammar and syntax on a micro-level, and above all, language as both medium and subject)? For that matter, what characterizes the poetic craft of prose poetry? For such precise explication, I find the 1974 edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* especially helpful.

[A prose poem is] a composition able to have any or all the features of the lyric, except that it is put on the page – though not conceived of – as prose. It differs from poetic prose in that it is short and compact, from free verse in that it has no line breaks, from a short prose passage in that it has, usually, more pronounced rhythms, sonorous effects, imagery, and density of expression. It may contain inner rhyme and metrical runs (Simon 664).

For one thing, in contrast to Baudelaire's suggestion that prose poetry is "without rhythm and without rhyme," a century and a half of prose poets have shown otherwise. In "Distance from Loved Ones," Tate employs both poetic techniques; we've discussed rhythm, and we'll soon arrive at rhyme. Likewise, "Distance from Loved Ones" demonstrates a "density of expression," packing a hefty punch for what amounts to a half-page of words. There's imagery, too: the face-lift operation gone bad, the seatbelt and "sad" drive home, Zita sitting alone in a salon, bald and crying. Last is the issue of conception and intent, how the poet formulates the poem and presents it to the audience. "One might argue that whether or not a text is a prose poem is...entirely a matter of context – a combination of intent on the part of the author, perception on the part of the reader, and an environment that encourages intent and perception to meet" (Clements 4). Well, certainly intent plays a role, and the first step in writing a prose poem is to conceive the project as a practice of

poetry, but there's more to it than that. Writing a prose poem involves numerous poetic techniques, each employed or not employed with intent, all within the framework of an unhindered, polymorphic creative space.

As it relates to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*'s articulation of prose poetry, it's worth noting how the definition changed between editions. In 1974, it remained necessary to clearly delineate prose poetry from prose and verse in explicit detail. At that time, a case was still being made for the bona fides of the genre (a genre over 100 years old), and there persisted a lack of certainty as to what exactly constituted a "prose poem." T.S. Eliot's criticism of the style echoed throughout the century, and it would still be four years before Mark Strand's *The Monument*, a collection of prose poems dealing with death and the existential, would be nominated and all but selected for the 1978 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, before being denied the award due to the book's prosaic features. In 1974, the poetry community wasn't quite ready to accept prose poetry as fully legitimate. The "genre" felt like a disconcerting stranger, an unfortunate new relative, shiftless and, perhaps, a bit lazy, irreverent and willfully dismissive of tradition. That's not to say there weren't notable poets writing prose poetry, or that the gatekeepers of contemporary poetry excluded prose poetry from serious consideration. It's simply that the genre needed more time to settle into the collective consciousness, the mainstream.

Consider the definition of prose poetry in the 1993 *Princeton Encyclopedia*:

With its oxymoronic title and its form based on contradiction, the prose poem is suitable to an extraordinary range of perception and expression, from the ambivalent (in content as in form) to the mimetic and the narrative (or even anecdotal)...Its principal characteristics are those that would insure unity even in brevity and poetic quality even without the line breaks of free verse: high patterning, rhythmic and figural repetition, sustained inten-

sity, and compactness...[The] prose poem aims at knowing or finding out something not accessible under the more restrictive conventions of verse (Caws 977).

Note the emphasis on function, what the prose poem *does* that distinguishes it from other genres: ambivalence, mimesis, narrative, discovery, and other “ranges of perception and expression,” all while displaying and maintaining poetic quality. By 1993, Charles Simic had won the Pulitzer for *The World Doesn't End*, a book of mostly prose poems, and the genre had entered the mainstream, if not been wholly embraced. Now, another 20 years have passed, and there exist as many variations of prose poetry as there are practitioners. For example, Clements and Dunham identify at least 24 distinct prose poetry categories, standard structures frequently employed by poets writing in the genre: Anecdote, Object Poems, Central Image/Object, Extended/Controlling Metaphor, Meditation, Flash Poems, Aphorism, List Poems, Repetition, Theme Variation/Development, Fable, Surreal Imagery, Rant, Essayistic, Address/Epistolary Poems, Monologue, Dialogue, Hybrid Poems, “Free-line Poems,” Structural Analogues, Abecedarian, Music, Sequence, and *Ars Poetica*. This list isn't comprehensive, but it's a useful tool. As for practitioners, by 2013, it seems nearly every poet, going all the way back to Eliot's “Hysteria,” have at least tried their hand at composing a prose poem, and there are those who've made it their aesthetic.

Which brings us back to Tate and “Distance from Loved Ones.” Before moving on from this specific example, it's worth addressing two more hallmarks of poetry in this poem: rhyme and “the turn.” In “Distance from Loved Ones” there's simple end-rhyme (where end-rhyme is defined as rhyme occurring at the end of a sentence or clause): “drop” and “stop;” “crying” and “dying.” There's internal rhyme: “died,” “decided,” “tried.” There's a great deal of slant rhyme: “her,” “shoulder,” “doctor,” “cancer,” “par-

lor.” In all, the poem contains just enough rhyme to please the reader’s ear without being overt and banal. The sonic effect is one of several threads woven almost imperceptibly into the scene, providing aural color. The rhyme pairs well with the structure and pace of the poem, creating an overall tone that feels faintly fable-like.

As for the turn, given the poem’s evolving landscape, “Distance from Loved Ones” almost seems to turn three separate times: first, when the speaker reframes the events of Zita’s life as a story retold by his mother; then, when the mother identifies herself as Zita and impugns the speaker’s behavior as her son; finally, when the speaker confesses to his mother that *he* is dying. “Poetic turns...can be narrative or dramatic. Just as a turn might signal a move from premise to conclusion, a turn might also consist of a transition from one emotional state to another” (Theune 3). “Distance from Loved Ones” produces those movements in rapid succession. Upon multiple readings it becomes apparent the primary turn occurs with the sentence: *My mother tells me all this on the phone, and I say: Mother, who is Zita?* That’s the moment when the poem moves from being a third-person story to a first-person experience. The ensuing moves could likely be labeled “turns” as well, but there in the middle, that’s where the poem’s hue changes. Randall Jarrell: “A successful poem starts from one position and ends at a very different one, often a contradictory or opposite one; yet there has been no break in the unity of the poem” (Theune 1).

The final step in analyzing “Distance from Loved Ones” is to categorize the poem according to the structural types offered by Clements and Dunham and Michael Theune. It’s an imprecise process, utilizing non-comprehensive labels that often overlap, but it’s a helpful exercise in order to understand the techniques employed by the poet. In this case, using the prose poem categories, “Distance from Loved Ones” seems to blend Anecdote

with Fable. “An anecdote is a brief narrative account based upon a personal experience. [It] transcends the individual event to arrive if not at an epiphany then at least at a powerful portrait that resonates beyond the significance of the initial experience” (Clements 9). Upon review, the poem is a narrative account of the speaker’s personal experience speaking with his mother. The historicity of the account is irrelevant; it doesn’t matter if this event actually happened as it’s described, or even happened at all. The poem builds toward a revelation, a declaration that affects the son-mother relationship and the speaker’s identity. The Fable, in turn, frequently “builds steadily towards a climax that brings the fantasy to a darkly literal level,” while using unusual, surreal situations (Clements 127). Although “Distance from Loved Ones” isn’t a classic fable – there are no talking animals, no cautionary moral – it does present surreal circumstance that borders on the imaginary, and it spirals into dark, personal territory. The poem concludes with, not a moral, but a statement of fact that reverberates and enlightens the entire piece.

Considering Theune’s categories of poetic structure – Ironic, Emblem, Concessional, Retrospective-Prospective, Elegiac, Dialectical Argument, Descriptive-Meditative, Mid-Course Turn, and Substructure – this poem mixes the Retrospective-Prospective and Elegiac types. The Retrospective-Prospective poem “deals with something that happened in the past...very private dilemmas, traumas, or feelings.” It then expands on that event “by bringing the poem into the present moment. This involves some kind of revision, realization, or new act based on the past” (Theune 61). As Theune also says, “Poetic structure is, simply, the pattern of a poem’s turning” (Theune 1). “Distance from Loved Ones” turns when an event described in the past tense (Zita’s life following her husband’s death) is pulled into the present. From there, mother and son take turns provoking realizations: *I*

am Zita, I am dying. It's debatable whether Tate intended to drape the poem on a defined framework, but it's clear the Retrospective-Prospective form fits. The Elegiac structure, on the other hand, "is concerned primarily with loss [and] is embedded with implied love and with an overwhelming need to triumph over death" (Theune 83). There's an obvious dirge-like tone to the poem – three of the four characters either die or are doomed to die. The poem revolves around response to death: Zita seeks to be like the rising Phoenix, but is quickly grounded by disease and mourns; the speaker seeks to comprehend and express his own mortality and imminent death. And there is a current of love buried beneath the poem's surface, though it's not an ideal love. At first, it masquerades as empathy for Zita, though it's laced with irony. Then it presents itself in the mother's frustration. In the end, if it's not outright love, it's at least a desperate cry for it between family members.

II. Anne Carson, *Plainwater*

Anne Carson's *Plainwater* consists of translated and modified poem fragments; a short academic essay; a mock interview of a seventh-century B.C. Greek poet; a series of linked prose poems; a second series of more prosaic, lineated poems that trace dual time-lines through an imaginary character; 36 enjambed poems that use "towns" as a medium of expression; and a seven-part essay, marked by poetic prose and confession, describing two pilgrimages, difficult gendered relationships, spiritual concern, and water. Carson and *Plainwater* both model much of what I do and aspire to do. Carson creates a coherent, unified text from disparate parts that, at first blush, seem random. The five sections of *Plainwater* – "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings," "Short Talks," "*Canicula di An-*

na,” “The Life of Towns,” and “The Anthropology of Water” represent the full spectrum of prose poetry. So, whereas “Short Talks” consists of clear-cut prose poems, “The Life of Towns” has more in common with conventional poetry. “*Canicula di Anna*” is somewhere in between; it’s lineated like poetry, but reads like prose. With the exception of the translated fragments in “Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings,” all other parts of *Plainwater*, including the essays, are written in poetic prose, replete with paragraphs. There’s clear poetry, prose, and everything that blurs the two in the book.

Part I of *Plainwater* is “Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings.” It includes “translations” of several Mimnermos fragments, augmented by Carson’s voice, a mini-essay on the fragments, “Mimnermos and the Motions of Hedonism,” and an invented interview with the ancient Greek himself, conducted by Carson. Presented without explanation, the translated poem fragments initially appear legitimate; Carson’s a linguistic scholar who knows more Greek – and more about Greek – than 99.9% of her readers. As Carson says: “There’s something about Greek that seems to go deeper into words than any modern language. So that when you’re reading it, you’re down in the roots of where words work, whereas in English we’re at the top of the tree, in the branches, bouncing around” (Aitken 199). The author, then, seems a trustworthy guide in translating Greek poetry. By Fragment 2, however, Carson undermines the credibility of her “translations:”

“You see the sun? – I built that.
As a lad. The Fates lashing their tails in a corner.
But (let me think) wasn’t it a hotel in Chicago
where I had the first of those...”

Even a reader with no experience in Greek would likely recognize Mimnermos probably didn't casually say "let me think," and he certainly never visited a Chicago hotel. On the second page of a 250-page book, Carson has already scrambled her readers' expectations. This section isn't dealing in translation; it's dealing in intertextuality. Carson mixes actual fragments, translated by her, with her own personal, poetic, interpretive response, and presents it all as one "Mimnermos" package. She conveys a message via her transformation of the original text. In her words, she's adding "tea stains:"

In surfaces, perfection is less interesting. For instance, a page with a poem on it is less attractive than a page with a poem on it and some tea stains. Because the tea stains add a bit of history. It's a historical attitude. After all, texts of ancient Greeks come to us in wreckage and I admire that, the combination of layers of time that you have when looking at a papyrus that was produced in the third century BC and then copied and then wrapped around a mummy for a couple hundred years and then discovered and put in a museum and pieced together by nine different gentlemen and put back in the museum and brought out again and photographed and put in a book. All those layers add up to more and more life. You can approximate that in your own life. Stains on clothing (Aitken 202).

This reappropriation would be less strange were it not for Carson's references to the modified translations in "Mimnermos and the Motions of Hedonism." There, in effect, she presents the artifice of an academic essay about Mimnermos's fragments without referencing their modifications. For example, she writes, "Consider the moment when old age darkens down on men and women in [Fragment 1]...It is a very unusual caesura, a notably nonlinear psychology" (Carson 15). Considering these poetic moves is no great challenge, but parsing what's written by whom proves to be. Are Mimnermos's fragments just the titles of each poem? Do they include the italicized comments? Is any-

thing in the poems original Mimnermos? Or is Carson just slyly analyzing her own work, using the conceit of a Greek poet and translation to point out *her* aims and methodology?

Finally, in “The Mimnermos Interviews,” Carson interviews her projection of the Greek poet about the whole thing; she writes an imaginary dialogue in which Mimnermos (“M”) adopts her altered poems as his and discusses them and himself with Carson (“I”):

M: It surprises me you came all this way

I: What a mud pond

M: You don't like rain

I: No let's get started can we start with your name

M: Named for my grandfather

I: The soldier

M: The great soldier

I: Can you tell us a little about him

M: He loved thunderstorms olives and the wilder aspects of life here he loved war

I: *None Such* is about him

M: I would have to say yes but you know a lot of it is invented fighting naked and things like that

I: I understand the text as we have it is merely the proemium to a much longer work

M: Well I don't know what you're reading over there nowadays those American distributors get some crazy ideas

In this excerpt, in a sense, Carson's interviewing a classic Greek version of herself, addressing, among other things, the liberty she takes with original material (“you know a lot of it is invented”) and the effect publication and the publishing industry have on a text's final package (“those American distributors get some crazy ideas”). Effectively, it's personal revelation and self-analysis via a beguiling trope.

In all, “Mimnermos: the Brainsex Paintings,” is a study in creative textual manipulation. The resulting effect of this section’s ambiguity is an uncertain, intelligent, intimate tone that’s amplified by Carson’s use of poetic technique. The author incorporates artful language in each of the three mediums: translation, essay, and interview. Regardless who penned various parts of the actual Mimnermos fragments, they clearly represent Carson’s poetry, even if just via translation: “No disease no dreamflat famine fields just a knock on the door / at the age of threescore: done” (Carson 8). Note the features of poetry therein: rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, imagery, syntactic moves, lineation. In the essay, Carson uses heightened language that, if lineated and contextualized differently, could be conventional poetry: “Like acrobats of the psychic misdemeanor we call history, warriors qua warriors live hovering above the moment when action will stop” (Carson 16). The “interview,” due in part to the fact that both the questions and answers originate from the same mind, possesses a seamless flow; that there’s no punctuation also makes the piece read like stream of consciousness. In one instance, “Mimnermos” responds to a query with an extended diatribe: “...I can’t give you facts I can’t distill my history into this or that home truth and go plunging ahead composing miniature versions of the cosmos to fill the slots in your question and answer period...” (Carson 25). It’s concentrated prose, stylized by a poet, embedded among varying forms of more explicit prose poetry.

Part II of *Plainwater* is “Short Talks,” consisting of 32 prose poems. With the exception of “Introduction,” each poem is titled “On...” such and such, as though each in its own right is an independent contemplation. The topics range from Gertrude Stein to Franz Kafka, from walking backwards to painting. Certain thematic threads appear in the collection: relational distance (almost violation), the personal stories of art and artists, the

author's desires. "Short Talks" concludes with the latter; "On Hedonism," "On the King and His Courage," and "On Shelter" are especially intimate, as though Carson's choosing to display herself a little less obliquely. "On Hedonism" accurately represents Carson's prose poetry:

On Hedonism

Beauty makes me hopeless. I don't care why anymore I just want to get away. When I look at the city of Paris I long to wrap my legs around it. When I watch you dancing there is a heartless immensity like a sailor in a dead-calm sea. Desires as round as peaches bloom in me all night, I no longer gather what falls.

In contrast to Tate's shifty "Distance from Loved Ones," "On Hedonism" is strictly a first-person account. Sentences here aren't surreal, but declarative, almost absolute: *this* and *this*, *this* and *this* – "I don't care why anymore *I just want to get away*;" "When I look at the city of Paris *I long to wrap my legs around it*;" "When I watch you dancing, *there is a heartless immensity*" (all italics are mine). The consistency of this grammatical pattern creates a matter-of-fact rhythm that endows the poem with a kind of sturdiness. It feels like defiance, and given the subject matter and the poem's final clause – "I no longer gather what falls" – that's a natural reading. Adding to the poem's rhythm is its use of *anaphora*: two of five sentences begin with "when," juxtaposing the speaker's response to Paris with her response to the poem's addressee. Likewise, several clauses begin with "I;" the cumulative effect is the tethering of the poem's perspective to that of the speaker. By such aspects of form, "On Hedonism" establishes a determined relational parameter.

The poem doesn't rely heavily on rhyme, but like "Distance from Loved Ones," it utilizes it subtly to evoke certain effects. The repeated "I" laces through the poem, a son-

ic touchstone. The first half of “On Hedonism” is marked by the alliterative “w:” “why,” “want,” “away,” “when,” “wrap,” “when,” “watch.” This series of words sounds doleful. The second half presents two triads of rhyme: “immensity,” “dead-calm sea,” and “bloom in me;” “calm,” “all,” and “falls.” Again, it’s enough rhyme to stimulate the reader’s ear, link parts of the poem, and embellish the rhythm without cluttering it up.

For its compact size, “On Hedonism” uses a great deal of figurative language. It’s one manner in which Carson shows her poetry chops. Whenever anyone says “Paris,” the immediate image that springs to mind is the Eiffel Tower, a giant protrusion into the sky above the famously romantic city. Carson grabs that image, mentions it, and sexualizes it in a way that might seem unfeeling were it not for the two preceding lines. “When I look at the city of Paris I long to wrap my legs around it.” It’s clear what Carson means – it’s almost impossible to not picture two giant legs, wrapping themselves around the Parisian skyline – but the speaker’s carnal hunger is counterbalanced by admissions of desolation: “Beauty makes me hopeless” and “I don’t care why anymore I just want to get away.” It’s a blue image in more ways than one. In the next sentence, Carson switches to simile when she compares the speaker’s extensive sadness, her emotionless desperation, to “a sailor in a dead-calm sea.” Carson frequently returns to water imagery in *Plainwater*; over the course of the book, it comes to represent a variety of people and feelings. Here, it’s despondency at the sight of a dancing “you,” possibly a lover. An alternate reading might suggest a kind of barren paralysis, sparked by joy, but that seems unlikely. Last, Carson uses simile again in describing her hedonistic desires, “round as peaches bloom.” The peach is a sensual fruit, an erotic image that can represent desire itself, a sexual experience, or certain parts of the female body. (It can also represent, simply, a peach.) Use

of “peaches” here might otherwise seem clichéd, except for the final clause: “I no longer gather what falls.” What falls are unpicked ripe peaches, unfulfilled desires. Using just a few words, Carson renders an image of a fertile tree, flush with desire, and neglected fruit, spoiling on the ground. The speaker is so accustomed to the situation, so “hopeless” and “heartless,” she doesn’t even attempt to attend to her unhappiness.

As for its prose poem category, “On Hedonism” appears to represent both Theme Variation/Development and Monologue. Theme Variation/Development “may refer to a controlling or informing idea behind a poem, or...any idea, phrase, or image with enough complexity to resonate in the poem” (Clements 109). In this case, the big idea is in the title: hedonism. In writing the poem and calling it “On Hedonism,” Carson clearly intends to infer the formal definition of hedonism – the ethical theory of pleasure as the highest human good – *and* the everyday use of the word as a stand in for the pursuit of pleasure. Carson traffics in philosophy, religion, and theories of existence; Socrates, phenomenology, Greek myth, and Christian tradition surface frequently in *Plainwater*. So, too, does the author’s sexual self-expression. It’s not surprising, then, to see Carson author a poem on sexuality and desire that presents sexual imagery through personal confession, backlit by philosophy and ethics. Of course, this poem recalls “Mimnermos and the Motions of Hedonism.” In a way, it all blends together.

Monologue “may be an internal thought shared with the reader...[It] has the dual capability of revealing insight, not only into the subject being discussed...but also into the character of the speaker” (Clements 197). By titling it “On Hedonism,” Carson implies this poem will address that topic, when in reality, it’s more about the speaker’s own sexual and relational state. The entire poem is an address of sorts to an undefined “you.”

As it's presented to the reader, though, the poem is a series of admissions that add dimension to notions of hedonism and self-indulgence. What's it say about the "highest human good" if one is unable to attain it without reciprocation? Is the result of abandoning oneself to hedonism a "hopeless," "heartless," "dead-calm" existence? Or overabundance? How do these questions reflect on the speaker? "On Hedonism" raises these questions while simultaneously describing a person captivated by the idea of pleasure.

Regarding the turn in "On Hedonism," it seems to occur with the last sentence: "Desires as round as peaches bloom in me all night, I no longer gather what falls." It's a statement that either summarizes the speaker's predicament, as described in her previous four sentences, or reorients the speaker's perspective, as she regards the present and the future, arriving at realization. Either way, the poem's most proximate structural category, as defined by Theune, is Descriptive-Meditative. "Poems that rely on this structure use the descriptive frame as a way to create the particular circumstances for a poem's meditation, and to demonstrate a change in the speaker when the outer scene is re-described at the poem's end" (Theune 123). The Descriptive-Meditative type is most associated with the Greater Romantic Lyric, and though it does match the broader Descriptive-Meditative criteria, at least on the surface, "On Hedonism" bears little resemblance to "Frost at Midnight," "Tintern Abbey," or the like. Whereas the traditional Greater Romantic Lyric describes a particularized, outdoors setting, "On Hedonism" merely mentions "the city of Paris." In lieu of overheard speech, the poem's speaker observes "you" dancing. Here, the speaker doesn't so much return to the original scene or turn toward another as turn inward with deepened resignation. Certainly, "On Hedonism" isn't attempting the Greater Romantic Lyric form; it simply presents a faint shade of the Lyric within the Descrip-

tive-Meditative structure. Ultimately, “On Hedonism” creates a frame for “meditation that moves between outward and inward landscapes, dramatizing a mind in the process of change” (Theune 135).

Part III of *Plainwater* is “*Canicula di Anna*,” which roughly translates, “The Dog Days of Anna.” This section consists of 53 numbered, lined prose poems that jumble together separate timelines: a modern phenomenological conference in Perugia, Italy and events surrounding a fifteenth-century Italian painter, Perugino. The eras are bridged by Anna, a mysterious woman whose life reflects Carson’s own, though not explicitly. “*Canicula di Anna*” is *Plainwater*’s oddest section, which is saying something for a book that defies so many conventions. Here, Carson again blurs reality (a phenomenology conference she may or may not be attending) with historical modification (stories of Anna, Perugino, and La Rocca’s vicious dogs). The most perplexing aspect of “*Canicula di Anna*,” however, is the title character’s relation to the speaker. In this section, it’s almost impossible to parse the speaker’s point of view; at times, she seems to identify with Anna – “In the official portraits / it remains unclear to me / who is who” (Carson 61) – and then, she treats Anna like a contemporary – “I was practicing my Italian in the bar... / when Anna came” (Carson 62) – or a historical figment of her imagination – “They do not know her here. That is, / I am free to invent her!” (Carson 52). Then there’s the similarity between “Anne” and “Anna;” when Carson describes registering at the conference, it’s possible to read it as her claiming an Italian identity – in Italy, she’s not Anne, she’s Anna. But what to make of all the third-person references and Anna’s ultimate demise?

This confusion takes place while the philosophers debate ideas and participate in being painted by a painter using fifteenth-century pigments; *that* character gets muddled

with both Perugino and Anna, and speaks, at least once, in the first-person. Carson uses the word “fever” several times in “*Canicula di Anna*,” an appropriate word. This section resembles a feverish haze in which people and events, real and imagined, mingle together. Also, the entire piece is itself a phenomenological expression, as Carson explores subjective experience and consciousness. In the “Afterword,” she acknowledges the vagaries of “*Canicula di Anna*” and how the lack of definition affects the reader’s expectations: “Because you would always like to know a little more. Not exactly more story. Not necessarily, on the other hand, an exegesis...I felt your body tense for a story, and for something else. You tracked and peered and stalked it through page after page. Now here we are” (Carson 88). In that sense, employing a form of unconventional prose poems is apt. Everything here is something else, and boundaries don’t apply. “*Canicula di Anna*” concludes with Anna boarding an airplane that is “exploded near Milan / by newsmen / simulating a terrorist incident.” It’s hard to imagine a more improbable, suitable ending.

Despite its ambiguous “plot,” and partially because of it, “*Canicula di Anna*” does provide an interesting case study in prose poetry. Most of the poems therein are lineated, but in every other way seem like prose; they’re essentially inverted prose poems. For example, “26:”

26

I will tell you two things about Anna.
She loves to dance.
She was born with a defect of the heart called *hemolysis*
which causes blue clots of blood
to appear on her arms. The condition
is not painful.
It indicates that she was to have been a twin.

Three things.
She killed her father.

This “poem” lacks rhythm, rhyme, sonorous effects, and imagery (other than the straightforward description of hemolysis). The only syntactic strategy employed is the two-word dependent clause in the penultimate line: “Three things.” Every other sentence is grammatically correct and...*normal*. The poem utilizes end-stops and enjambments, but they seem to just be the result of the lineation. “26” is compact, offers density of expression, and displays a hint of rhetoric in the repetitive “She,” but otherwise doesn’t seem poetic. Were it not for the following three factors, I’d say “26” was merely lineated prose.

First, “26” doesn’t occur in a vacuum; it’s delivered in the context of a book filled with genre-defying prose poems, poetic essays, interviews, and conventional poetry. As such, Carson seems to intend for “26” to be read as more than prose. “The only requirements for the prose poem are that it be written in prose and be presented in the context of poetry” (Clements 4). As I previously discussed, there’s more to it than that, but regardless of whether lineation and poetic intent are in themselves sufficient to label something “poetry,” read in context, that’s clearly what “*Canicula di Anna*” is supposed to be.

Second, in addressing what constitutes a poem, it’s worth noting Carson’s ideas:

Some people think...the poet takes a snapshot of an event and on the page you have a perfect record. But I don’t think that’s right; I think a poem, when it works, is an action of the mind captured on a page, and the reader, when he engages it, has to enter into that action. And so his mind repeats that action and travels again through the action, but it is a movement of yourself through a thought, through an activity of thinking, so by the time you get to the end you’re different than you were at the beginning and you feel that difference (Aitken 203).

That's a great explanation of "*Canicula di Anna*," which feels like a poet's mind in action. That it's blurry and difficult to decipher amplifies the effect of inhabiting Carson's mind; understood that way, the more-prosaic-poem serves as a kind of literal life raft. Without the grammatical sentences and easy to follow language, the reader might be lost. Instead, the "normal" style informs the reader's experience of Carson's active thinking. That is, the poet designs a series of poems that embody in form and content her surreal, feverish thoughts, but allows the reader to follow along by making the poems prosaic.

Last, there is a dramatic turn at the end of "26," when a third "thing" is proposed, then revealed: Anna killed her father. It's a surprising declaration that alters the poem's complexion and layers "26," "*Canicula di Anna*," and *Plainwater* with meaning. Given the poem's immediate surroundings, it's already known that Anna is an enigmatic character whose relationship to the speaker (re: Carson) is personal, though undefined. Later, in "46," the speaker explains that Anna was abandoned by her father, and when Anna eventually sent him pictures of her newborn son, the shock of it made her father keel over and die (or so said "important" aunts). In retrospect, these events take on greater significance as Carson writes about the descent of her own father into incontinence and death in "The Anthropology of Water." It seems the author was writing herself into the character of Anna, a trick Carson also pulled in the Mimnermos fragments and interview. So, the turn in "26" functions as a standard poetic turn, but also as one of the book's axes.

Ultimately, there are enough poetic effects in "26" and "*Canicula di Anna*" – lineation, the use of language to mimic the poet's mind, density of expression, the turn, and poetic context – to justify calling this section "poetry," albeit plain.

From *Plainwater*'s most prosaic poems to its most conventional: Part IV is "The Life of Towns," 36 lineated, heavily enjambed poems that would fit neatly in a collection of standard poetry. Each poem's title includes the word "Town," as though each poem is itself a town, though there's little reference to geography or civic activity. In the "Introduction," Carson explains, "Towns are the illusion that things hang together somehow, my pear, your winter...Matter which has painted itself within lines constitutes a town" (Carson 93). Towns, as the author perceives them, are metaphorical units of thought, notions and ideas somewhat fleshed out, related to a particular person. Each poem in "The Life of Towns," then, is a complete personal expression. As Carson says, "I am a scholar of towns" (Carson 93). There's no direct connection between these poems, no narrative or recurring characters, as there were in "*Canicula di Anna*." "The Life of Towns" does address common *Plainwater* themes: desire, relational difficulty, death, and spirituality.

Also, in contrast to the previous section, most of the poems here utilize traditional poetic technique. For example, "Apostle Town:"

Apostle Town

After your death.
It was windy every day.
Every day.
Opposed us like a wall.
We went.
Shouting sideways at one another.
Along the road it was useless.
The spaces between.
Us got hard they are.
Empty spaces and yet they.
Are solid and black.

And grievous as gaps.
Between the teeth.
Of an old woman you.
Knew years ago.
When she was.
Beautiful the nerves pouring around in her like palace fire.

Immediately noticeable in “Apostle Town” is the poet’s use of punctuation; every line ends with a period, just as every line begins with a capital letter. The result is an unusual rhythm that terminates the expressed thought before it’s completed. It’s a plodding pattern that doesn’t allow elucidation; these are quick, heavy doses of description. The first few lines appear to function grammatically, independent of one another, when interpreted poetically – “After your death.” sets the scene; “It was windy every day.” establishes a mournful tone and is a complete sentence; “Every day.” reiterates the constancy of the speaker’s sad state and sounds conversational – but then comes the fourth line: “Opposed us like a wall.” It’s a phrase that, given its lineation and punctuation, doesn’t seem to make sense, and it doesn’t work as its own sentence. As the poem progresses, it becomes apparent that the periods should be disregarded as it relates to the poem’s ability to make literal meaning. For example, “Every day.” and “Opposed us like a wall.” should, in the reader’s mind, read, “Every day opposed us like a wall.” “The spaces between.” and “Us got hard they are.” should read, “The spaces between us got hard. / They are...” And so on. Using this rubric, “Apostle Town” can be decoded, and what it’s “about” grows clear. Of course, Carson didn’t write the poem in clean, uninterrupted sentences; there are plenty of places in *Plainwater* where she does that. Here, she employs each line, full-stopped, like the “lines” she describes in the “Introduction:” “You will at first think I am painting the lines myself; it’s not so. I merely know where to stand to see the lines that are there.

And the mysterious thing, it is a very mysterious thing, is how these lines do paint themselves” (Carson 93). If a poem here is a town, the lines might be understood as streets or houses, complete in themselves, full of meaning, but part of a larger component, which is the town, the poem. Carson’s self-described role is to demarcate the lines as they exist. So, “Us got hard they are.” operates as a line *and* as part of the connective fabric of the poem. The lineation and syntax, then, serve to enact Carson’s idea of towns as poems.

There are other poetic features in “Apostle Town.” The poem contains rhetorical gestures: *anadiplosis*, where “every day” ends the second line and constitutes the third; *ploche*, in repetition of the phrase “they are;” *antithesis* where “...they are. / Empty spaces and yet they. / Are solid and black.” contrasts opposites. There are instances of rhyme, notably “black” and “gaps” at the end of successive lines, and “you” and “Knew” split by a period. Other words repeat (“day,” “spaces”), creating a subtle sonic echo. The poem also turns with the final line: “Beautiful the nerves pouring around in her like palace fire.” – it’s the first lively, optimistic note in the poem, doubling as the poem’s strongest image. Carson renders an old, gap-toothed woman whose sole purpose seems to be to underscore the bleakness that consumes those who go on living, but instead, the woman ends up representing the raw energy of life.

Though she employs conventional poetic techniques in “The Life of Towns,” Carson still displays a prosaic bent. These poems could be re-lineated to read as lyrical prose. Consider “Memory Town:” “In each one of you I paint. / I find. / A buried site of radioactive material. / You think 8 miles down is enough? / 15 miles? / 140 miles?” Or “Death Town:” “This day whenever I pause. / Its noise.” Though “The Life of Towns” is

Carson at her most poetic, it still sometimes feels like she's writing stylized prose that happens to be pinned on the page by lineation. It makes for weirdly readable poetry.

If *Plainwater* represents the full spectrum of prose poetry and poetic prose, Part V, "The Anthropology of Water," lies at the end of the scale, just shy of standard non-fiction. "The Anthropology of Water" is a seven-part section, consisting of three essays in which Carson explores her relationships with her father, friend, lover, and brother through three metaphorical conceits: a pilgrimage to Compostela, Spain, a cross-country camping trip, and swimming lessons. Each essay is composed of journal entries, presumably recorded when Carson visited different locales: "Buergete, 22nd of June," "Marthasville, Missouri," "Monday 5:30 a.m. Swimming." "The Anthropology of Water" is easily the most prosaic section of *Plainwater*, though it frequently betrays the poetic inclination of its author. If certain portions were excerpted, they might be naturally classified as prose poetry, though that's not Carson's intent. She simply writes as she writes; whether it's a mock interview with a Greek poet, a one-off prose poem, or a travel essay, Carson's language is bound to sound poetic, even in its most discursive and narrative expressions.

Take, for example, this excerpt from the second "Lachine, Quebec" entry (of five) in "Just for the Thrill: An Essay on the Difference Between Women and Men:"

Lachine, Quebec

To desire and be desired, what could be simpler? A woman cannot tell a simple story, my father used to say. Well here is what it looks like on the videotape. You see desire go traveling into the total dark country of another soul, to a place where the cliff just breaks off. Cold light like moonlight falling on it.

It was a full-moon night about a year ago, the first time I went to his house. I wore a gray dress with buttons, and not telling him that it was the first night I went to any man's house, ate chicken. Then he so carefully washed each pot. Standing at the sink he rinsed

each pot. Standing there he dried each pot. And said. Turning, "I like this dress." (Why?)
"Because there are so many ways to take it off."

This text is surrounded by paragraphs, embedded in a journal entry that represents 1/67th of an essay, one that combines with two other essays to constitute one of five sections in a book. That's to say, this text is buried in other words, the most immediate of which are presented as prose. Yet, "Lachine, Quebec" contains many aspects of prose poetry. First and most obvious, it's not lineated, so unlike "26" or "Apostle Town," "Lachine, Quebec" must be prose or prose poetry; the lack of lineation precludes it from being conventional poetry. It has a poem's rhythm, though. In fact, parts of it are almost metrical: "...my father used to say. Well here is what it looks like on the videotape." It's doubtful Carson predetermined to write a rhyming, iambic line spread across two sentences, but the line's there. Likewise, the sentences "Then he so carefully washed each pot. Standing at the sink he rinsed each pot." both contain nine syllables and corresponding rhyme. "Then he" pairs with "Standing," "carefully" with "at the sink he," and "rinsed each pot" mirrors "washed each pot." These features give "Lachine, Quebec" subtle musicality.

On the subject of rhyme and sonorous effects, the author repeats words in separate sentences ("simple," "moon," "went...house," "break off/take off"), altering them slightly in a way that interweaves points of interest in "Lachine, Quebec." In some sense, the sentences bleed into each other. More so than in the other Carson pieces I've analyzed, here, she also employs sound to make the prose resonate and layer it with meaning: "Cold light like moonlight falling on it. It was a full-moon night about a year ago..." That's a lot of assonance and consonance in two short sentences. But it's not heavy-handed.

“Lachine, Quebec” displays rhetoric and creative use of grammar and syntax, too. As for the former, there’s *anthyphora*, where Carson poses, then replies to a question; *anadiplosis*, where “it” ends the first paragraph and begins the second; *epistrophe*, where “each pot” ends three successive sentences; and *anaphora*, where “Standing” starts back-to-back sentences. As it relates to grammar and syntax, Carson makes very specific decisions. Unlike Tate in “Distance from Loved Ones,” she spares commas – there aren’t any after “Well” in the first paragraph or “Then” and “Standing there” in the second – a move that speeds the prose along and imbues “Lachine, Quebec” with an informal, unswerving tone. Instead, she deploys periods and incomplete sentences to break the rhythm at key points. “Cold light like moonlight falling on it.” and “And said.” aren’t grammatically proper, but they do work to emphasize moments Carson considers worth pondering.

Last, “Lachine, Quebec” contains dense, lyrical language and a turn, traditionally poetic features. The whole journal entry is only three paragraphs, the approximate length of a standard prose poem. It fills half a page with imagery: “the dark country of another soul,” “cold light like moonlight,” a man methodically doing his dishes, buttons on a gray dress. Then, at the end, the delicate balance of insecurity, desire, and propriety is ripped apart by this fastidious man’s bold sexual insinuation. It’s a narrative turn in the form of character development, which is typically a plot device, something characteristic of prose. And, of course, this *is* prose, but it goes to show Carson’s poetic skill that there’s a case to be made for “The Anthropology of Water,” at least in bits, being prose poetry.

All told, in *Plainwater*, Carson demonstrates almost every shade of prose poetry and poetic prose, from the most traditionally poetic in “The Life of Towns,” to the normal prose poems in “Short Talks,” to the slightly lyrical, personal and academic essays in

“The Anthropology of Water.” The poet employs a variety of mediums, including translation, the interview, a surreal narrative spread over several poems, and travel journals. Throughout, she manages to create a coherent, unified text with singular tone and style. Labeling that style proves challenging, not just for me, but for nearly everyone. Another excerpt from Carson’s interview with *The Paris Review* is illuminating:

INTERVIEWER: I remember sending your work to various literary shows and editors. The responses I got when anybody bothered to respond was just complete bewilderment. “But this isn’t poetry, this is clearly prose. This is in paragraphs, I can tell the difference between prose and poetry.” And they would just be completely dismissive.

CARSON: Yes, and since then there’s been what people call a paradigm shift, which means now you can’t do anything wrong, but which really means people are offering equally blind judgments of the work. I don’t know why that happens. I guess people are just afraid to think. They like to have a category that’s ready so they can say: “Okay, now we know this is good, we can enjoy it” (Aitken 222).

Carson isn’t too concerned with categorizing her work. She simply writes and allows the art to speak for itself. That’s not to say she doesn’t employ artistic technique, both traditional and non-traditional, or that she doesn’t reach for certain standards; rather, Carson is aware her poems, prose poems, and essays inhabit a blurred, indefinable space, a reality that, oddly, exposes her to dismissive criticism *and* undiscerning, categorical praise.

As for the individual sections of *Plainwater*, each offers its own lesson in writing prose poetry and poetic prose. “Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings” revolves around the author’s knowledge and modification of external texts. Carson demonstrates how to transition seamlessly between an original document, translation, and liberal reinterpretation. “Short Talks” is a lesson on prose poetry, an expert in her element, condensing her

poetic prose into poems. Powerful imagery accompanies a confessional tone, and yet, the poems never seem overloaded or melodramatic. “*Canicula di Anna*” models the way in which a series of poems might mimic the activity of a poet’s mind. The balance between portraying confusion and appearing prosaic is more difficult to achieve than it appears. “The Life of Towns” is more conventional poetry, but there are valuable moves to study. Notably, Carson breaks her sentences up with odd punctuation and enjambment, inflates the poems with imagery, and ends up with something unique that reflects the philosophical motif of towns as personal expression. “The Anthropology of Water” shows prose’s ability to embody poetry by adopting poetic effects, such as rhythm, rhetoric, and the turn. Spanning 142 pages of essays, Carson never reads dry or prosaic, but the author’s touch is light enough that, though the essays feel artful, they’re never loose or sentimental.

III. Joe Wenderoth, “August 19, 1996” and “January 3, 1997”

August 19, 1996

Today I was thinking that it might be nice to be able, in one’s last days, to move into a Wendy’s. Perhaps a Wendy’s life-support system could even be created and given a Wendy’s slant; liquid fries, for instance, and burgers and Frosties continually dripped into one’s vegetable dream locus. It would intensify the visits of the well, too, to see that such a care is being taken for their destiny.

January 3, 1997

I’ve been sort of hesitant to mention this, but I believe that one of your employees – you *must* know the one I speak of – is a beaver. It’s impossible to look into her face, to hear the sounds she makes, and to see the way she moves, the way she carries bits of wood,

and to not feel that *this is a beaver*. I've not mentioned this before because, obviously, beavers are powerful creatures.

In stark contrast to Anne Carson's poetic prose and prose poetry and James Tate's "Distance from Loved Ones," Joe Wenderoth's prose poems display few traditional poetic features. Whereas Carson's prose frequently feels poetic, and Tate's poems and prose poems are obviously poetic, Wenderoth's work, such as "August 19, 1996" and "January 3, 1997," often neither feels nor seems poetic, at least initially. Then again, the poems in *Letters to Wendy's*, Wenderoth's collection of poetry conceived as a series of completed Wendy's customer response cards, fully embody Baudelaire's first definition of prose poetry: each letter's a poem "without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience." *Letters to Wendy's* is many things – *ars poetica*, cultural critique, ill-natured mind-dump – but it's certainly well-described as supple, rugged, lyrically impulsive, full of revelry, and hyper-conscientious. The poems are also surreal, humorous, bleak, and explicit. So, Wenderoth and these two poems represent the least "poetic" poems in the prose poetry canon. "Often the difference between rhythmic prose and poetry is very slight" (Baum 666). So says Baum and every other reader of prose poetry. Further, "many pieces labeled as 'short short stories' would not be out of place had they appeared in a poetry magazine publishing 'prose poems,' and vice versa (Delville 107). It's worthwhile to analyze such ambiguous poetry to better understand how it functions.

When it comes to *Letters to Wendy's* lack of traditional poetic features, it's easier to note what's present than what isn't – "August 19, 1996" and "January 3, 1997" show density of expression, imagery, and the turn. That's it. They display no rhythm, other

than the plain-spoken stream of a one-way dialogue. Where Carson might shun commas and Tate might pepper some sentences with them, Wenderoth simply uses them normally. Likewise, where the others might halt or speed the poem's flow through grammatical and syntactic maneuvers, Wenderoth, for the most part, just writes regular sentences. John D'Agata suggests this normalcy represents the poet's commentary on postmodern poetry:

One can feel Wenderoth searching in this book for an *in*, a return to perhaps what Allen Grossman has termed "the lyric shift" – that moment that marks the origin of poetic speech – before irony, before "post-irony," before the franchise of American language. American poetry has moved, for the most part, away from dwelling in this moment. Wenderoth has written elsewhere:

"Many of our esteemed poets have implicitly declared that the origin of poetic speech is not this moment, but is *the everyday someone* who has always weathered this moment, and who speaks from *near* it, from after it – not from within or under it. Such an everyday someone, when claiming to speak poetically, is not *given* to this moment in a creative way but, rather, is *using* this moment. Such a poet is, ironically, warding off the opportunity for poetic speech to begin...If one is truly in the need for a poem to begin, one is, in some sense, where nothing has ever been said" (D'Agata 63).

That assessment seems accurate; part of the prose poem's function is to embody in form the poet's intent, frequently counter-cultural. Plain, inexpressive language seems an appropriate reaction to postmodernism's irony and "post-irony," especially if such language serves as a precursor to the poetic moment.

Regarding these poems' other features (or lack thereof), "August 19, 1996" and "January 3, 1997" do not possess rhyme, either, or sonorous effects. There's no alliteration or repeated vowel sounds, nothing like the aural echo produced in Carson's prose and prose poetry. Other than the imagery, nothing glitters in these compact prose poems.

The closest thing to rhetoric occurs midway through “January 3, 1997,” where clauses beginning with “to” are repeated: “to look into her face, to hear the sounds she makes, and to see the way she moves...” There’s a hint of rhyming iambic beat, but not much, and it’s the only such instance. So, these poems lack the infrastructure that classic rhetoric can provide. In sum, there’s little that’s expressly “poetic” about either poem.

The question then presents itself: what makes these prose poems *poems*, not short prose? It’s harder to answer this question about “August 19, 1996” and “January 3, 1997” than “Distance from Loved Ones,” which possessed clear poetic features, or “26,” which was highly prosaic, but still lyrical and lineated. Wenderoth’s prose poetry does possess some poetic attributes to which I’ve already alluded: density of expression, imagery, and subtle turning. Each poem consists of three sentences and roughly 75 words; Wenderoth issues concise epistles, packing them with symbolic heft. As for imagery, perhaps Wenderoth’s greatest skill is his ability to conjure and communicate bizarre images that, here, grow out of the ultra-ordinary fast food experience. For example, the poet follows a train of thought – he enjoys Wendy’s *so much* – to a fantastic conclusion: the ideal end-of-life scenario is to absorb liquid fries, burgers, and Frosties “into one’s vegetable dream locus.” He could have stopped with the image of liquid French fries – that’s sufficiently creepy – but the poet proceeds to casually, coolly raise the specter of a “vegetable dream locus.” It’s remarkably vivid description of something so abstract and weird, an effect he repeats throughout the book. What’s most strange and exhilarating for the reader is that the speaker doesn’t find anything he says, wild as it may be, strange or exhilarating. Another signature of *Letters to Wendy’s* is the turn, which usually occurs near the end of each poem. “August 19, 1996” turns at the final line, when the speaker recasts the intravenous-

burger death experience as something “the well” (re: the reader) might happily anticipate. In “January 3, 1997,” the turn occurs halfway through the last sentence with “beavers are powerful creatures.” It’s the sort of line that frequents Wenderoth’s poetry, a line that manages to perplex, entertain, awe, and inspire agreement simultaneously.

Additionally, there’s the issue, once more, of intent and context. Wenderoth is a poet who also writes essays; that’s to say, when deciding how best to categorize his work, apart from how the poem, essay, or short functions on the page, it’s safe to privilege his poetry background and assume poetic intent. In other words, *he* thinks of these pieces as prose poems, and since they meet the minimal criteria, they are. “Writers are under no obligation to classify their writing for us. But their intentions, if articulated, could be thought decisive” (Lehman 15). It’s not ideal to rely on peripheral data to aid in the classification of a text, but sometimes, with a genre that lacks absolute definition, that sort of ancillary information tips the scale. As does context. Each poem in *Letters to Wendy’s* exists not on its own, but as one in a long line of similar expressive spurts. Both the surrounding material and the book as a whole establish a pattern for “August 19, 1996” and “January 3, 1997” that’s decidedly not prosaic – it feels like poetry, more so as the reader reads the poems successively. And yet each poem retains individuality. It recalls Simic’s explanation of *The World Doesn’t End*: “What makes them poems is that they are self-contained, and once you read one you have to go back and start reading it again. That’s what a poem does” (Lehman 12).

A prose poem does a little more than that, as it’s often “meant to instruct or entertain. Usually, it is composed of organic associations that move from an implied or stated premise. Many of these premises are wild observations or conditions that are worked in-

to logical proofs by means of rational, linear logic. The level of language is often colloquial, but in some cases it is ‘mock formal,’ pretending to be serious but ending in parody...Many times the tone of the prose poem is witty, skeptical, or self-consciously playful” (Myers 245). Again, that’s a definition of prose poetry that almost seems tailored to “August 19, 1996” and “January 3, 1997.” *Letters to Wendy’s* instructs and entertains, utilizes organic associations – implied and overt – wild observations, mock formality, and wit. So, it isn’t traditional poetic technique that really makes these pieces poems, rather, something in their literary DNA, a mix of intent, context, aim, personality, and light poetic features, such as density of expression, subjective impulse, extended metaphor, the turn, and an imagistic or emotional motif.

Finally, it’s helpful to return to the prose poem categories outlined by Clements and Dunham. “August 19, 1996,” “January 3, 1997,” and the other 287 “letters” to Wendy’s are Epistolary poems. “The epistolary poem, when done successfully, uses the relationship between addressor and addressee to engage the reader. The poem appears to be a genuine correspondence or, at the very least, allows the readers to follow along in a state of suspended disbelief. The poem can convey a sense of urgency and even trust to the reader, allowing an almost voyeuristic glimpse in the world the poem encapsulates” (Clements 185). Wenderoth conceived of these poems and wrote them as letters; whether he actually penned them on the back of response cards or dropped them in a plastic box is irrelevant. The speaker is the addressor, directing thoughts on Frosties, fellatio, language, existence, and other topics toward an inanimate, corporate entity. He never addresses the reader, thereby making the reader a third-party observer, a “voyeur.” There is something voyeuristic about *Letters to Wendy’s*; regardless of how he perceives himself, the speaker

paints himself as a weird loner leering at strangers, the wacko peering out from the corner booth. But, then, the book forces the reader to watch the speaker, eavesdrop on his mind. Wenderoth succeeds in drawing the reader into the whole off-kilter routine.

IV. Relating Tate, Carson, and Wenderoth to My Work

As a writer of prose poetry, poetic prose, and other work that defies categorization, I recognize certain similarities between my writing and that of James Tate, Anne Carson, and Joe Wenderoth. As for Tate, my poetry tends to not be wildly surreal, like his often is – I wouldn't write "Epithalamion for Tyler" or "First Lesson," for example. Instead, I base my poems in the quotidian, intensify my focus there, and seek to address the bizarre realities of daily life. In lieu of creating a strange environment, I emphasize the everyday, which to me, appears strange enough. See my "Retail:"

Retail

I inhabit a half-human reality. A shade of a man, slightly more than merchandise. *Nope, I'm sorry, mam. I don't come with the crib.* I never used to regard salespeople as people. I am not regarded as a person. I'm a personal corporate entity, the embodiment of brand. I'm just another wall – paint me to match this season's fabulous, colorful, perfect patterns. ...I want to eat your money. I'll eat your money if you give me it. I'll give you this lamp if you let me eat your money. On a morale-boosting conference call, the Regional Manager rallied us with his preferred battle cry: "*Now make that money!*" What would Dave think if he knew I snuck into the loft, swallowed all the cash drawers' contents, chased it with expired soy sauce I found in the fridge? ...A customer accosted me tonight, shoved a doll in my chest, eye marbles rolling back, droning about something, but I wasn't listening. There were crisp, green bills peeking out her purse, fresh and crunchy.

The scene here is simply the backstage of a business and the events that arise in a typical day: common quotes, complaints, and transactions. By recording them in relatively unadorned prose, adopting an unemotional tone, and extending their logic through metaphor, I seek to extract the weirdness embedded in the retail work experience. More than that, I'm attempting to poke at the odd realities of capitalism. That effort, along with my technique, recalls Wenderoth's *Wendy's* letters. Wenderoth also employs plain syntax, natural language, and first-person, declarative sentences. My prose poems and my "regular" prose usually utilize traditional poetic techniques, as I'll explore shortly, but they almost always begin with such prosaic features.

Likewise, my writing often revolves around the drama of my own mind, especially as it involves ideas and paradigms; prose poetry is an ideal form for such artistic, mental exercise, as the style itself implies a kind of questioning. I appreciate how Wenderoth, in *Letters to Wendy's*, drafts ideas, philosophy, and cultural criticism into prose poems that, on the surface, might seem to merely be about one man's eccentric infatuation with a restaurant. It's not the use of the trope that's uniquely appealing – extended metaphors certainly aren't limited to prose poetry – it's the way prose poetry allows a poem to more fully, plainly embody that about which it pretends to be, while undeniably representing something deeper. For example, in "January 3, 1997," a fast food worker, basking in the light, scurrying, making funny noises, becomes a beaver, an emblem of consumer culture and social class. Or perhaps, "beaver" should be understood as a crass sexualizing term, a juvenile epithet for an ugly person, or an actual talking animal (to Wenderoth's speaker, these might be one in the same). The poet intends all these interpretations to varying degrees – he traffics in implication and explicitness, using the literal and narrative façade of

prose poetry as a lens to blur and focus his intent accordingly, as he engages issues whose honest treatment requires a touch of ambiguity. That's essentially my methodology, too.

As for conventional poetic technique, like Tate in "Distance from Loved Ones" or Anne Carson in *Plainwater*, I infuse most of my writing with things like rhetoric, rhythm, rhyme, and other sonic effects. Along with shaping the reader's experience of my poetry, these features imbue my work, which might otherwise read as plain prose, with strategic musicality and additional meaning. See the first paragraph of my "Declaring Myself:"

Declaring Myself

I remember the American airport, saying goodbye to my parents and Jonathan, my friend. I was leader of the missions team; I focused on herding our band of believers to the gate. I remember the cross-Atlantic flight, back when you could listen to a CD player from taxi to touchdown. I listened to *Lillywhite*, disconsolate DMB. Boarding the plane in Zurich, our final flight, the ferry to our new home, I saw a laminated sign near the cockpit: a goat, a red 'X' drawn through it. There'd be no goats. And then we flew to Moscow, muscled heart of the brown bear. Shuffling through the Russian airport, noting rusted coffee cans bolted to the ceiling, upside down, I remember, I felt free. I was everything I'd ever be.

It's become second nature to incorporate rhetorical devices in my writing, however lightly, as a kind of infrastructure. This tendency grounds me in literary tradition and allows me to capitalize on well-established techniques that I employ by-the-book or deviate from as needed. So, Carson's use of rhetoric in "The Life of Towns" and "The Anthropology of Water" mirrors my own. Here, in "Declaring Myself," I lace *anaphora*, in the form of the repetition of sentences beginning with "I" and the phrase "I remember" to underscore the speaker's heightened sense of self-identity, essentially the subject of the full poem. I intend for this effect to be subtle – I rejected the idea of beginning every sentence with "I"

or “My,” and I wanted to insert enough space between the second and third “I remember” for the reader to forget the repetition, before recalling it. As with rhythm and rhyme, using rhetoric too liberally or overtly can result in a distracting, cluttered poem.

“Declaring Myself” does not contain a true metrical pattern; sometimes I do insert iambic beat into my prose poems across clauses, sentences, or short paragraphs (e.g. “The Donut Depot”). Either way, rhythm, established by word choice, clause usage, and punctuation, especially commas, effectively energizes my material. My sentences accelerate or decelerate according to their construction, alternately relieving or creating tension. As Tate demonstrates in “Distance from Loved Ones,” rhythm is a helpful and necessary tool for the prose poet, given the absence of line breaks. In “Declaring Myself,” I begin with parallel structure in the first two sentences: 24- and 25-syllable sentences that each start with 11- and 12-syllable clauses, respectively. The result is a processional tone suitable for describing transit. Elsewhere in the poem, I include a series of seven-syllable clauses, broken by one four-syllable clause (“our final flight”) and, later, an inverted echo of the same pattern, beginning with “There’d be no goats.” Similar to the ultimate line in “Distance from Loved Ones,” here, following a series of roughly equally paced clauses, I rev the engine with numerous commas (“Shuffling through the Russian airport, noting rusted coffee cans bolted to the ceiling, upside down, I remember, I felt free.”) before releasing the pent-up energy in the sentence that articulates the speaker’s self-actualization: “I was everything I’d ever be.” Throughout this and other prose poems, I utilize sentence structure and various types of punctuation to emphasize significant moments.

In “Declaring Myself,” I use rhyme, too, and other sonic effects to interweave the poem’s moments and introduce musicality that collaborates with the rhythm to embellish

the tone. Tate and Carson work similarly. In my poem, there is alliteration with “band of believers” and “taxi to touchdown;” assonance with “flight,” “*Lillywhite*,” and the repeated “I;” and basic end-rhyme with “cockpit...through it” and “felt free...ever be.” Subtle rhyme – though I admit, my rhyme’s not *always* subtle – is perhaps the clearest indicator that my writing is more than conventional prose; it’s the most noticeable poetic feature of my work. The rhyme is especially evident when my poems are read aloud, which is how I write them: by reading them aloud to myself as I edit, until the music’s right. In this instance, with the poem’s final rhyme (“...I felt free. I was everything I’d ever be.”) I aim to animate the conclusion with a bit of whimsy that matches the speaker’s revelation, just as I did with the last two sentences’ rhythms.

Speaking of rhyme and other poetic effects, it’s worth considering one more poem of mine, the first paragraph of “*You Were at the Time for Love*” (after Don Chaffer’s song by the same name):

You Were at the Time for Love

I talked to God about everything. That’s the thing: when you believe, you’re never alone. There’s someone, something there, knowing you, listening while you express your human being. I can’t explain why it feels so real, the affirming fog, except to say, to me, it’s real. About ministry, I said I hoped he’d glorify himself through me, use me like a vessel, a jar full of fireflies. I thanked him for how he’d blessed me, provided friends, money, family, faith. Even the void, I thanked him for that, too. I sat at my desk, silent, waited. Prayed for my teammates, for our team. That we’d love one another, believe the best about each other. I asked that he’d govern the work, guide us to the right people, grant us favor, like Nehemiah. I prayed for Russia, for Russians. That he’d care for them, redeem the nation. Like I’d done for years, I requested protection: *Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil*. I had God, but I was lonely as hell. Moscow’s a hard place to be lonely.

Here, there are additional examples of the traditional poetic techniques found in my other poems: rhetoric (*epistrophe* and *chiasmus* in the first three sentences), rhythm, and rhyme, (“Russians,” “nation,” “done,” “protection,” “temptation”). Also, as with “Retail,” “*You Were at the Time for Love*” handles ideas – prayer, divine companionship, and loneliness – though it does so via prayer-like stream of consciousness, not the surreal, business-like declarations of the earlier poem. Notably, “*You Were at the Time for Love*” demonstrates two more poetic strategies that I employ in my prose poetry: figurative language and unusual grammar and syntax. In this arena, I consider Carson a model; in *Plainwater*, relying heavily on such maneuvers, she renders narrative prose poetic, so that her lyric essays and non-fiction blend seamlessly into her book of prose poems and conventional poetry. My manuscript, *Like to Be*, contains several more prosaic pieces, replete with plot points that move the threaded story forward; one such piece is “*You Were at the Time for Love*,” a three-paragraph prose poem that balances a character-driven build to epiphany, typical of prose, with poetry’s linguistic concerns. For example, I employ figurative language, in the form of metaphor (“affirming fog,” “jar full of fireflies”) and simile (“lonely as hell,” a cliché I deploy purposefully). In this poem, I also break grammatical rules: I use run-on sentences to embody the prayer experience, adjust the rhythm, and focus on key concerns (“I sat at my desk, silent, waited. Prayed for my teammates, for our team. That we’d love another...”). All these features – rhetoric, rhythm, rhyme, various sonic effects, figurative language, grammar and syntax – and other ones, such as a title, use of white space, and density of expression, work together to create a prose poem that, on the surface, more closely resembles conventional prose than most of my writing. Then again, that’s prose poetry’s appeal: an artful ambiguity that allows the text to be and do many things at once.

Bibliography

- Aitken, Will. "Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry No. 88." In *The Paris Review* 171 (2004): 190-230.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *Paris Spleen*. Translated by Louise Varese. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1970.
- Baum, Paull F. "Prose Rhythm." In *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics - Enlarged Edition*. Alex Preminger, ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.
- Beckman, Joshua. *Your Time Has Come*. Amherst: Verse Press, 2004.
- Buckley, Christopher and Gary Young, eds. *Bear Flag Republic: Prose Poems and Poetics from California*. Santa Cruz: Greenhouse Review Press, 2008.
- Carson, Anne. *Plainwater*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Caws, Mary Ann. "Prose Poem." In *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, eds. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Clements, Brian and Jamey Dunham, eds. *An Introduction to the Prose Poem*. Danbury: Firewheel Editions, 2009.
- D'Agata, John. "Review of *Letters to Wendy's*." In *Boston Review* 26, no. 2 (2001): 63.
- Delville, Michel. *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998.
- Lehman, David. *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present*. New York: Scribner, 2003.
- McDowell, Gary L. and F. Daniel Rzicznek, eds. *Field Guide to Prose Poetry*. Brookline: Rose Metal Press, 2010.
- Myers, Jack and Michael Simms. *Longman Dictionary and Handbook of Poetry*. Longman: New York, 1985.
- Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*. Seattle: Wave Books, 2009.

Ranke, Bin. "James Tate's Lost Mother." In *On James Tate*. Brian Henry, ed. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004.

Schomburg, Zachary. *The Man Suit*. Boston: Black Ocean, 2007.

Simic, Charles. *The World Doesn't End*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1989.

Simon, John. "Prose Poem." In *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics - Enlarged Edition*. Alex Preminger, ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Strand, Mark. *The Monument*. Manhattan: The Ecco Press, 1978.

Theune, Michael. *Structure & Surprise*. New York: Teachers & Writers Collective, 2007.