"Without Contraries is no progression:" Reading the Prose Poem

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A poem often announces its presence on a page by virtue of its appearance. Without reading a word, a reader may immediately conclude that a text is a poem because it is written in verse, a feature typically perceived as inherent in the genre of poetry. Unlike prose, which appears as blocks of text in the space between the margins of a page, poetry, through versification, travels down the page in a more deliberate manner—assuming the figure of a slender or stocky column, cascading conscientiously in couplets or quatrains, submitting consistently to rule of the left-hand margin, or spreading out unevenly in a sea of white space. The unit of composition in poetry written in verse is the line, and a crucial difference between what Stephen Dobyns identifies as "two systems of poetry," metered and free verse, lies in the confirmation (in the case of the former) or frustration (in the case of the latter) of the reader's expectations regarding patterns in a poem (53). Denise Levertov describes the line-break as "a form of punctuation additional to the punctuation that forms part of the logic of completed thoughts. Line-breaks—together with intelligent use of indentation and other devices of scoring—represent a peculiarly poetic, a-logical, parallel (not competitive) punctuation." These poets underscore the line as a device that illuminates a poem's prosody, generates pauses to heighten the significance of particular words and moments in a poem, converts the silence of white space into an active participant in a poem's tension, and manages the pace in which a poem unfolds.

While fully aware of the functions of and corresponding pleasures derived from the line, I am interested in the prose poem, that is, poetry that does away with verse. That it is difficult, to say the least, for many readers to conceive of poetry that lies outside "the esthetics that made versification essential to poetic art" (Riffaterre 98) is evident in the terms used to describe the prose poem: "a *hybrid* form, an *anomaly* if not a *paradox* or *oxymoron*" (Lehman 13). Other readers have gone so far as to reject the possibility reconciling poetry and prose, which Peter Johnson, in his introduction to *The Best of the Prose Poem: An International Journal*, acknowledges when he writes, "I recognize, of course, the humor in editing a collection in a genre which many intelligent poets and critics do not think exists." A milder form of skepticism is exhibited in my own poetry workshop classes, where the identity as a poem of a draft written in verse, no matter how badly written, is rarely (or never) viewed with suspicion, yet the "poem-ness" of a draft written in prose, no matter how promising and engaging, is bound to be—however gently—questioned. Levertov, while acknowledging the existence of the prose poem, fears its susceptibility to amateurish poetry. Concerned with its misuse as a convenient excuse to abandon the art and discipline of lineation, she notes, "some of our best and most influential poets have increasingly turned to the prose paragraph for what I feel are the wrong reasons—i.e., less from a sense of the peculiar virtues of the prose-poem than from a despair of making sense of the line." Although the notion of prose poetry is nothing new, and many established modern and contemporary writers can be counted among its practitioners, its marginal status in the consciousness of readers is equally unsurprising. If one skims the poetry section of any bookstore or library, chances are, one will find mostly poetry *written in verse*. The significantly smaller circulation of prose poetry is confirmed by Steven Monte, who, in the year 2000, pegged the number of British and American prose poem anthologies at ten (233) and French prose poem anthologies at three, "a tiny number considering that the *poeme en prose* became an

accepted form early on in France and has played a significant role in that country's poetic tradition for the last 150 years" (228).

The prevailing perception of the line as an indispensable (perhaps even the *most* indispensable) feature of poetry suggests that many of us hold fast to the belief that we know a poem when we literally *see* one. This became particularly clear to me when I first read William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (1790-1793) in *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse* edited by Jerome J. McGann (2002). I was enrolled in a graduate course called British Romantics, and we were required to read the anthology, which features a range of poems published from 1785 to 1832 arranged according to year of publication, in entirety. The context in which I read "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" is important because it allowed me to see the text as memorable for a reason that would not necessarily have been evident to me had I read it as an individual work and not in the company of hundreds of poems of its time, for example, or had I read a reproduction of the illuminated book and not a plain typographical text rendition without the company of Blake's art. In reading "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" as part of close to eight hundred pages of poetry in McGann's hefty anthology, I was struck by the fact that it was written primarily—and stubbornly, it seemed—in prose amid a dense population of verse-poetry. (The only other prose text was Sir William Jones' translation of *A Hymn to Na'ra'yena.*) If I had to choose one piece in the anthology that made me "feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off," it would undoubtedly be "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." At the same time, I found myself asking a question often asked of prose poetry, one that sounded so simple, the answer ought to be obvious: *Is this a poem?*

As a child, Blake told his parents he had a vision of "a tree filled with angels;" at around thirty, he invented relief etching with the help of a dead brother who appeared to him in a vision (Vultee); and shortly before he died, "His eyes Brighten'd and He burst out into Singing of the things he saw in Heaven." About their life, his wife Catherine said, "I have very little of Mr. Blake's company. He is always in Paradise" ("William Blake: 'Always in Paradise'"). In "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," the speaker (Blake himself) collects proverbs while taking a walk in hell, hangs out in a printing house in hell, declares Milton to be "of the Devil's party without knowing it," dines with the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, and witnesses the conversion of an Angel (the embodiment of Good, which "is the passive that obeys Reason) into a Devil (the embodiment of Evil, which "is the active springing from Energy"). A true brainchild of its author, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," which has gone by such labels as "philosophical manifesto" (Nurmi), "program for prophecy" (Miller), and "apocalyptic satire" (Bloom "Bible of Energy"), is so seductive in the strangeness of its adventures; so shamelessly confident in its paradoxical propositions; so fierce in its attack of conventional, conservative, organized religion, particularly the New Jerusalem Church and its leader, Emanuel Swedenborg (if one goes by way of what "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" is historically considered a critique of); and so insistent in its belief in "the autonomy of each human imagination" (Bloom 2); that one may very well say what this "structureless structure" (qtd in Fuller 124), this mixed dish of prose and verse, proverbs and parables, commentaries and "memorable fancies" hardly matters. When a text already brims with complexity and yields a variety of pleasures for the reader, it seems "the problem of nomenclature is—as Marianne Moore observed of attempts to differentiate poetry from prose—'a wart on so much happiness'" (Lehman 15).

Early on in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," Blake proclaims: "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence." To cast prose poetry in the light of Blake's faith in contraries, his "marriage of heaven and hell," is neither to deny its existence, which rejects the possibility of contraries ever figuring in a marriage, nor to avoid the task of nomenclature, which, in the well-meaning decision to focus "on so much happiness," refuses to contemplate the prose poem's

oxymoronic nature. Both options end the conversation about prose poetry all too easily. Instead, it is to proceed from the premise of a site where contraries co-inhabit and direct one's gaze at its implications. If, as Charles Simic asserts, "the prose poem is the result of two contradictory impulses, prose and poetry, and therefore cannot exist, but it does" (Lehman 14), then the task is precisely to subject to further interrogation what, by nature, is resistant to it—this "abstraction meant to question generic boundaries [that] accordingly resists definition" (Monte 2).

In choosing to include "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" in *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse*, McGann imposes the generic label *poem* on it, a decision echoed by Clark Emery when he writes, "the work is not a normal poem nor a play nor a story [and is] so loosely organized as to seem a mere potpourri, [yet] it has such energy and dramatic potential as to appear always to be bursting from its expository cocoon to take flight… It can be criticized only as a poem" (8). David Lehman, in his introduction to *Great American Prose Poems* (2003), names the sections which share the title "A Memorable Fancy" in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" as an English precursor of modern prose poetry. It seems, especially when confronted with genre-bending texts like "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," "the desire for generic definitions does not go away so easily: we do not stop searching for some holistic perspective in which we can better understand the parts" (Monte 33). Identifying a text as a poem, for example, if it has not already been done for us by publication context or knowledge of the author's intention, stems from our assessment of it as a composite of features that we are trained as readers to perceive as peculiar to or particularly prominent in poetry. At the same time, classifying a text under the genre of poetry provides us with a method by which to read it and arrive at meaning. What "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" makes especially explicit when situated amid the verse-poems in McGann's anthology—whose identities as poems may strike a reader as beyond question, if only because they are broken up into lines—is the illusion that genres are fixed and governed solely by inherent or exclusive features, which continues its hold on contemporary readers even "at a time when 'generic instability' has become an accomplished fact" (Delville 9), where "poets, with [their] book-length poems and 'novels-in-verse,' and prosers, with their 'sudden fiction' and 'short shorts,' are swapping shovels at the rabbit hole" (Voigt 116). Consequently, McGann, Emery, and Lehman, in calling "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" a poem, are presenting readers with a proposition with which to explore the meanings of the text, not stating a fact. Genre, Monte explains, becomes "much more an interpretive framework than a category of classification" (24), and "'What does is mean to read X as a prose poem?' may turn out to be a more significant question than "Is X a prose poem?'" (4)

Lehman's assertion that Blake's "Memorable Fancies" may very well be included in the literary tradition of the prose poem invites the question, "What does it mean to read the 'Memorable Fancies' as prose poems?" To address this question, a brief description of the structure of "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" is in order. Written as a sequence, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" is divided into sections arranged to animate each other and add up to a larger whole while concurrently, in the case of some sections more than others, maintaining their integrity when read individually. Emery identifies fourteen parts, with several expository, discursive sections he labels "Prose Comments" interspersed with fantastical (as the name implies) "Memorable Fancies" that are bookended by a verse "Argument" and a conclusion titled "A Song of Liberty" (29). While narrative exists in the text, the traditional linearity that narrative promises does not oversee its progression. By virtue of the structural repetitions, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" as a whole evolves cyclically.

What strikes me as its most autonomous sections are the "Memorable Fancies," which are described by Bloom as "parodies of Swedenborg's "Memorable Relations" [in his book *Heaven and Hell*], in which the Swedish visionary…describes[s] the wonders of the spiritual world," noting that "Swedenborg is the eternal type of prophet who becomes a new kind of

priest, and by becoming a church loses his imaginative strength, until he concludes by renewing the religious categories of judgment he came to expose as impostures" (*William Blake's* Marriage 2). John Howard, who clarifies that Blake's disillusionment with and critique of Swedenborg seems less a result of the Swedish mystic's writings than what he perceived to be the fall from grace of the New Church via the "corrupting influence of priestcraft," further adds that "the episodes of the *Marriage* lead through a series of pictures of the process of corruption in various forms to the final memorable fancy of the work, the corruption of the Swedenborgian New Church." While many critics have delved into the specific historical circumstances to which "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" is a satirical response and read it accordingly, what is revealed by examining its "Memorable Fancies" through a lens that entertains the tensions within "a more liberal concept of 'poetry' that may inhabit verse and nonversified work alike" (Santilli 146) seems especially relevant to the contemporary reader exposed to a plethora of genre-bending texts in general and confronted with a proposition for the classification and interpretation of a particular text, as in the case of "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" in the context of a Romantic poetry anthology currently in circulation.

Since, as Monte points out, "prose poetry must arise in a milieu in which prose and poetry exist in some sort of opposition" (23), this "more liberal concept" is inextricably linked with upholding, at any given moment of reading, prose poetry's oxymoronic status. Unlike verse-poetry, whose generic identity is often, if not always, a given, prose poetry continuously asserts its identity as a poem against the fact that it is written in prose. Consequently, to read a prose poem is to attempt incessantly to stabilize it as a category—to resolve or eradicate the tensions that keep one from accepting its "poem-ness"—and to fail just as incessantly, upon its making explicit the fluidity of genres and the absence of any fixed and exclusive generic traits, to do so. It is from the tension between the shattering of the illusion of fixed genres and the retention, albeit simultaneously cast in doubt, of formal expectations distinguishing one genre from another, that prose poetry draws much of its complexity. Michel Delville's analysis of the twentieth-century fabulist (also neo-Surrealist and absurdist) American prose poem (if we are to go by a tradition of prose poetry written in English), with which the "Memorable Fancies" bear both formal and thematic affinities, provides a point of entry for this—for lack of a better term—"meaningful exercise in futility." Citing Eileen Baldeschwiler's analysis of "two dimensions of narrative [in the modern short story], one vertical (internal or metaphorical), the other horizontal (external or metonymical)," Delville proposes that "*degrees* of external 'narrativeness' and internal 'lyricalness'… apply to the difference between the (short) short story and the prose poem" (101), a range within which a reader oscillates when approaching a text that may fall under either "boundary genre" (243). He writes:

> Because of its brevity and its extremely restricted linear or syntagmatic dimension, the prose poem logically invites the reader to focus on its "vertical" or paradigmatic dimension. Examples of the superior "verticality" of the prose poem can include a higher degree of metaphorical, lyric, or allegorical content (as in many prose poems displaying strong affinities with the genres of journal entry, meditation, dream-narrative, or parable) or… a renewed attention to the very language or discourse that brings it into being… While a reader presented with a work labeled a prose poem is more likely to read for vertical attributes of poeticity, the same reader faced with a similar text labeled a (short) short story may be led to pay more attention to its sequential or "horizontal aspects." In other words, the same piece of writing can be assigned different hermeneutic priorities and read *as* a short short story or a prose poem. (107)

The five "Memorable Fancies" are the most narratively driven sections of "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"; in each section, Blake's "I" is firmly grounded in a setting or situation, be it "walking among the fires of hell" ("A Memorable Fancy" 1), dining with the prophets ("A Memorable Fancy" 2), observing "the method in which knowledge is transmitted from

generation to generation" in hell's printing house ("A Memorable Fancy" 3), journeying with a Swedenborgian angel to explore their "lots in eternity" ("A Memorable Fancy" 4), or witnessing a discussion that leads to friendship between an Angel and a Devil (who may very well be Blake himself) ("A Memorable Fancy" 5). There are "nonlyric or nonmeditative elements accounting for the protagonist's concrete movements and actions" (Delville 97), bits of dialogue, and a cast of characters the "I" either converses with (as in Isaiah and Ezekiel in "A Memorable Fancy" 2) or observes (as in the Dragon-Man, Viper, Eagle, Lions, Unnam'd forms, and Men of "A Memorable Fancy" 5). In reading the "Memorable Fancies" as prose poems, however, as Delville suggests, a reader may point out that these elements are subsumed under predominantly lyric attributes, if not a governing lyric moment. Surreal and hallucinatory, these texts, by their very title and the manner in which they unfold, arguably spring from a lyric "I," "originat[ing] in an essentially subjectivist impulse… which contributes to an interiorization of the narrative into a kind of dream-vision" (Delville 98)."A Memorable Fancy" 1 and 3, in particular, subscribe to the aesthetics of brevity associated with lyric poetry. All five texts unfold primarily not by *horizontal* sequence but by *vertical* "tunnel vision" and end ambiguously, with mysterious, paradoxical final statements or unanswered questions that elude definitive resolution and invite re-reading. The privileging of description and thus, the density of imagery (as in "A Memorable Fancy" 3, where the speaker outlines the process of producing and disseminating knowledge in hell, and "A Memorable Fancy" 4, where an Angel and the speaker plunge into the lengthily described "infinite Abyss") and the compression of action (as in "A Memorable Fancy" 1, where the speaker collects proverbs in hell in the first sentence and is back home "on the abyss of the five senses" in the next) enlarge and deepen the metaphorical dimension of these texts. More than dramatizing a sequential journey, a "joyride" of sorts into hell, these renditions infuse the image of hell with metaphorical density, "expos[ing] and reject[ing] the normative moral categories of Good and Evil of orthodox religion" (Nurmi 59) by converting what conventional symbolism has portrayed to be dangerous, undesirable, and downright wrong into a wellspring of "Infernal wisdom" and imagination. Similarly, the references to writing "with corroding fires" in "A Memorable Fancy" 1 and 3, while functioning as details in the bizarre literal situations of the texts, extend beyond the literal and into the self-reflexive by alluding to Blake's own method of production, relief etching, which he describes in a "Prose Comment" as "printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid." Finally, the conversations that make up "A Memorable Fancy" 2 and 5 also attain metaphorical resonance by not functioning dramatically, whether in the service of conflict or character. We are made to receive the utterances of the speaker, Isaiah, Ezekiel, the Angel, and the Devil as ends in themselves and not as a means to propel a narrative, and the conclusions regarding Poetic Genius and "all deities resid[ing] in the human breast" are generated not by illustrative action but via the meditation of multiple speakers.

While the lyric features of the "Memorable Fancies" work toward stabilizing their poetic identity, their prose format is the persistent antagonist that simultaneously dismantles this stability, bringing to the fore not only the possibility that the texts are not poems, but also—and more importantly—the possibility that they are *anything but* poems. Charles Baudelaire, who popularized the prose poem as a form with the release of his *Petits poemes en prose* (*Little Prose Poems*) in 1868, famously said, "Who among us, in his ambitious days, hasn't dreamt of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm and rhyme, flexible and choppy enough to adapt itself to the lyrical movements of the soul, to the undulations of reverie, to the somersaults of consciousness?" (qtd in Monte 64) If versification is a given in poetry because of the corresponding musicality it registers, then to read the "Memorable Fancies" as prose poems is also to seek the ways by which, in the absence of the line, they demonstrate auditory qualities that are in tandem with their thematic preoccupations, preserving the artfulness of language perceived as most explicit in verse-poetry and stabilizing, once again, its poetic identity. Because

they employ the sentence as their unit of composition and are "unfettered by the relatively formalistic interruptions of the line break" (qtd in Delville 130), Blake's prose poems acquire a velocity brought about by a "succession of sentences, not lines, [that] moves faster than verse" (Lehman 12). This more continuous, more apparently unadorned pace, bereft of any pauses other than those made in casual speech, seems most compatible with the surrealist visions and preoccupations of the "Memorable Fancies," since it recreates the less crafted, less seemingly deliberate, and more uninhibited "undulations" and "somersaults" of the imagination. Without the more pointedly stylized pacing, pauses, and inflections, whether slight or emphatic, commanded by the line, what emerges is a discrepancy between the sobriety of the prose format and the fantastical content that becomes a constant source of surprise for the reader; the sentence becomes more audibly straightforward and matter-of-fact, which in turn, downplays the strangeness of the situations. One need only to imagine the first sentences of all the "Memorable Fancies" in verse form to realize the tension and humor arising from their being cast in the rhythms of ordinary, everyday language by virtue of the prose format.

Dobyns writes, "It is not necessary for a poem to employ traditional meters, but it must have a rhythm; otherwise it moves into the province of prose… The fact that the poem is a sound—that it is meant to be heard—gives rhythm an importance that it doesn't have in prose" (54). To recognize the ability of Blake's prose to fulfill the expectations perceived as exclusive to verse is to say there is no "otherwise," to contest Dobyns' claim by illuminating, in what emerges to be the futile attempt to resolve the genre to which the "Memorable Fancies" belong, the shared functions and thus the blurred boundaries between the province of prose and poetry, and proclaiming the paradox that the "art" of verse is the "art" of prose and the "artlessness" of prose is the "artlessness" of verse. Consequently, as in the case of Blake's parable-like reveries, the prose poem opens the floodgates for the appropriation of "such unlikely models as the newspaper article, the memo, the list, the parable, the speech, the dialogue," emphasizing "its willingness to locate the sources of poetry, defiantly far from the spring on Mount Helicon sacred to the muses" (Lehman 13). Such appropriations make admissible further intersections, the boundaries between genres turning murkier and murkier as they lose their hold on features traditionally perceived to be inherent and exclusive to them. If Blake's "Memorable Fancies" uphold the aesthetics of brevity traditionally attached to poetry, so do many other texts in prose—flash fiction, short stories, and the variety of texts that go by the term "creative nonfiction." Besides, what constitutes brevity? If, in their self-referentiality through making visible the process of their production, the "Memorable Fancies" deconstruct "the myth of the self-present, transcendental lyric self… by means of a foregrounding of the methods determining its coming into being" (Delville 125), then perhaps they may be classified, read, and anthologized as metafiction. The fact that Blake's "Memorable Fancies" are written in prose is the unshakable context that turns the features that may arguably serve as evidence of their unquestionable poetic identity, such as brevity, purposeful musicality, and metaphorical density, into blatant indicators of the fluidity and instability of genres, since these may, in turn, be appropriated, if not simply utilized, by any other text in any other genre written in prose. By unraveling the stronghold of fixed genres, the oxymoron that is prose poetry makes us particularly aware that "at any given moment in our reading," writes Monte, "we identify only a handful of generic traits or contexts. Our sense of genre is therefore always 'in progress,' changing as we read onward and encounter new interpretive frameworks" (10). It also reminds us, by embodying an extreme in a range of writing practices, that less "genre-controversial" texts raise similar questions. After all, how many narrative poems have made us wonder why they were versified and not written as short stories instead? How many poems, because of their painfully bare or discursive language, have we not been so keen on accommodating within the genre of poetry?

In "The Borderline of Prose" (1917), T.S. Eliot writes, "There are doubtless many empirical generalizations which one may draw from a study of existing poetry and prose, but after much reflection I conclude that the only absolute distinction to be drawn is that poetry is written in verse, and prose is written in prose… any other essential difference is still to seek" (qtd in Santilli 138). Monte notes a clear revision in Eliot's stance when four years later, in the essay "Prose and Verse," Eliot writes, "I object to the term 'prose-poetry' because it seems to imply a sharp distinction between 'poetry' and 'prose' which I do not admit" (143). The proposition to read "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" as a poem and the claim that its "Memorable Fancies" are a precursor to what has come to be the prose poem are invitations to the reader to abandon, as Eliot has done, the unwavering attachment to "sharp distinctions" between the genres by inhabiting the space where the contraries converge. To read Blake's "Memorable Fancies" as prose poems is to settle comfortably in what turns out to be the ever elastic and therefore ever unstable space where the lines between genres blur, which is the same place where some of the greatest pieces of literature reside.

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