The Untaught Module
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Biographical note:

Rupert Loydell is Senior Lecturer in the School of Writing and Journalism at Falmouth University, the editor of *Stride* magazine, as well as a writer, publisher and artist. Shearsman recently published *Dear Mary*, a book of poems about Italy, colour, art, and annunciation; other critical writing has appeared in *Punk & Post-Punk, Journal of Writing and Creative Practice*, *New Writing* and *Journal of Visual Art Practice.*

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Whether one regards prose poetry as poems that use everything except lineation or as poetic prose, it remains difficult to define, despite the growth in popularity of the form (or forms), as evidenced by the number of anthologies in the last twenty years, and how the prose poem is now an established and accepted part of many poets’ work.

One of the disappointments I have had in the last decade, having published two prose poem anthologies (one of which I co-edited) and contributed work to others, was writing and successfully validating a prose poem module at Falmouth University that somehow never made it into the timetable before our degrees had to be rewritten. What this enabled me to do, however, in lieu of formulating a definition, was to think about how to categorise prose poems, and to facilitate the study and writing of them. What topics or themes were appropriate? What processes and forms useful?

I tend to teach with a wide range of material, rather than focussing on one text in detail, allowing for comparison between texts, as well as dialogue between students and texts, and discussion between students. So I decided to start with a week tracing the development of the prose poem from Baudelaire, Mallarmé and twentieth-century Modernists, followed by a week considering post-World War 2 and contemporary prose poetry. (That word *contemporary* would allow me to use anything recent, and as exciting as I wanted!)

Further weeks would be spent considering texts umbrella-ed under titles such as ‘Parables and Fables’, ‘Journals and Diaries’, ‘Object and Analogue’, ‘Travelogues’, ‘Meditation and Contemplation’, ‘The Haibun’, ‘Documentary’, ‘List and Found’ and ‘Short Short Fiction’, encouraging engagement with a wide range of authors both critically and as models for writing workshops. Students would have to write an essay and a coherent portfolio of prose poems, not just a gathering of workshop pieces, for their final assignment.

I looked forward to using Beckett’s and Borges’ short fictions, and Robert Lax’s journals; to comparing Alice Oswald’s pastoral navigation of the River Dart with Brenda Coultas’ daily exploration of the Bowery in Manhattan; and to introducing students to David Jones’ difficult and somewhat neglected work. To consider how John Taggart recreates Rothko’s paintings in words and also writes about his own work; how John Ashbery and Sheila E Murphy reinvented the haibun in American English; how McKenzie Wark’s grid-referenced socio-geopolitical texts could be considered poems. But it was not to be.

One of the interesting anthologies of prose poems I discovered was Kempher’s *Always the Beautiful Answer*, which gathers up ‘Some Helpful Definitions & Discussions’ before moving to a section which considers ‘Some History—The Innovators’. The rest of the book considers three poets in some detail before offering some ‘Borderline Cases’ and a surprising gathering of contemporary poets. Just as interesting as the poems themselves are the short introductory notes that many authors offer about how and why they write, an informal poetics I thought my students would benefit from reading.

The other must-have anthology that I decided would also be a set text for my students was Clements and Dunham’s *An Introduction to the Prose Poem*, which uses a similar but different set of headings to gather up poems. As well as overlapping with some of my titles it offered ‘Anecdote’, ‘Repetition’, ‘Rant’, ‘Dialogue’ and ‘Essayistic’ works, as well as ‘Prose Poems About Prose Poems’. This parallel but differing approach would allow students a wider and different take on the prose poem, and also offer them a generous number of examples for use in both their essay and the seminar presentation each would be asked to give.

Of course, since our degrees were rewritten and then rewritten again, I have used many of these texts in different teaching contexts, be that poetry, creative nonfiction, or a recent module to do with mash-up, collage, recycling and writing back to what we read, but part of me still wishes I’d been able to teach the module I spent time planning and researching, on the back of my own, continuing, interest in and use of the form.

*Towards a Definition*

Prose-poetry is when a person behaves differently from what is considered normal— and realizes they have stepped into someone else’s arms, someone who is as much in control of the world as they are.

It is a place where language is all compression and angle; tautness; a signpost to a different meaning. It is a key to a house with no doors, to a library full of books you want to read but must use to stoke the fire—for otherwise there is no warmth.

List of works cited

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