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65 Sonnets

When prose poets gather at conferences to discuss the prose poem, we feel somewhat obliged to define the prose poem. Why? We feel responsible for marking our territory; unlike the purebred dogs, we cannot fall back on pedigree. They'll always get in the show. This presumption leads them to some wonderful self-esteem. For instance, I once taught a beginning poetry workshop at Yale for which there were more applicants than spots. So students had to submit work with a statement of interest and credentials. One student's chief argument was simple: "I've written 65 sonnets." I had to let him in. Would I have been as impressed by a young poet saying, "I've written 65 prose poems"? Certainly not. The sonnet is a greyhound; the prose poem, a mutt. It's all sorts of things: a note from the underground, mulligan stew, the bastard son, garage music, a curio box, a dressed-up anecdote, a dressed-down monologue, a very nice

garbage can, a Trojan horse, a dark horse ridden bareback, a funny domicile, a postmodern protofable....

But is it poetry? It's hard to stifle the question. It keeps coming up, especially among verse poets and nonpoets. And I ask myself: is this a good question or a stupid one? It's stupid to the extent that the questioner has no idea what's being asked. For the question is not only, or really, about poetry. It's a question that sits in the middle of every debate about artistic and social change. We all reach the point where we can't keep up, and we feel disoriented, forgotten; we want the new days to be like the old days. We want our new poems to be like the old poems. Modern culture makes Rip Van Winkles of us all. We wake up one morning and discover that we can hardly recognize what we're seeing, outside of us and inside of us. Even Bob Dylan, in his recently published autobiography, admits that he reached the point where he feared his own irrelevance. This, from a man who once had the nerve to use an electric guitar in front of folkies. They didn't even bother to ask, "But is it folk?" The electric guitar was Iago, and the audience a sea of weeping Desdemonas. I can't help but sympathize with the audience. Eros is limited; she only has a few

moves—or rather, we remain sensitive to only a few moves, and those were the ones she tried out when we were particularly vulnerable. So even as we become more educated, and more orchestral in our tastes, what touches us may be quite narrow. Our emotions develop before our taste buds, and the taste buds are perpetually trying to catch up. Personally, I suffer from the *Steppenwolf* effect. Every novel I read suffers in comparison to *Steppenwolf*, which staggered my fourteen-year-old heart in a way no subsequent novel can match, even those I recognize as intellectually and artistically superior. Many of our allegiances are based on timing. Maybe if I hadn't been introduced to the prose poem in my second puberty (graduate school), I would think nothing of the prose poem. I might despise it. But I was lost, and it found me.

In general, though, Picasso was right. Everything new is ugly (In poetic terms, the prose poem is relatively new). We could add that everything new is also unartistic, since art has to do with beauty and the traditions of beauty. Just as it takes us a long time to get over our childhoods, it takes us a long time to get over our high-school conceptions of beauty. I still cling to Dylan, to Led Zeppelin, but I

have my doubts about the music that came later. Hip hop? Speed metal? Club? They all lack something, don't they? Subtlety? Complexity? Emotional range? Melodiousness? Soul? There's a repressed conservative in the most die-hard liberal, and that conservative is whispering, "The old art was better. The old art was more meaningful." It's why my grandfather says, "You know that poem "I never saw a poem as lovely as a tree"? Amazing. Now *there's* a poem." This view is widespread, even in bastions of progressivism. Consider National Public Radio. How often does their musical programming venture into the twentieth century? Rarely, and even then you're far more likely to hear late romantics like Samuel Barber or Edward Elgar than any of the twelve-tone composers or post-war musicians like Boulez and Stockhausen. And many NPR listeners, though they'd hate to be called anachronists or aristocrats, would probably side with Prince Charles in despising contemporary architecture. The show they love is *This Old House*. Most builders are still making colonials.

Is there anything wrong with this? No and yes. No because taste is a personal right. Yes because the more people who look backward, the

more truth and beauty and goodness seem to lie behind us, in some enchanted realm of childhood, milk bottles and rhyme. One could argue that these are strictly artistic questions. *But is it poetry? But is it painting? But is it music? But is it dance?* And that when you say “no,” your no is a purely aesthetic judgment. But no is a great multiplier; one “no” represents a series of concentric circles, all of which form our social and political life, where we face similar questions. *But is it marriage?* No, the majority say, a marriage is between a man and a woman. They’re not willing to do away with the woman, or do away with the man; they want to be inclusive, and at the same time acknowledge that a lawless universe is a godless universe. *But is it patriotism?* No, you get behind your president in a time of war; there are times when unity is essential, and dissent is inappropriate. It sends the wrong message to the enemy. *But is it strength?* No, strength is knowing what you believe, and never deviating from your course. You cannot be strong and simultaneously mistaken. That violates the unity principle.

These “no’s” add up to a way of life, and a defense of a way of life, that cherishes the time-honored values of god, country, family. If it’s

possible to believe that our national history—and moral history, generally— is a record of pure and uplifting form followed by steady corruption, then it's possible to view aesthetic history as following the same pattern. Then it becomes time to institute the old regime, the old discipline. Artists are not immune to this nostalgic turn (even members of the old avant-garde see the new avant-garde as trivial: a gesture, not a revolution). So most artistic stances, implying if not saying “yes” to this and “no” to that, can be viewed simply as commitments to artistic seriousness. There is a deep and still-resonating bias in Frost's statement, “Free verse is like playing tennis without a net.” I wonder what Frost would think about prose poetry, which has not only gotten rid of the net but is also erasing the lines. Some poets consider that cheating. To me it is not a question of cheating, on the one hand, or observing the rules, on the other, but whether the poem changes the language—in essence, achieves Pound's criteria and makes it new. Art has to mutate in order to live. Mutation is positive, not freakish; it is the mind's attempt to diversify itself, emotion looking for a new set of ducts and orifices. We should admire the mutants among us, encourage them. Prose poets are the X-Men and X-Women. Does anyone doubt that Russell Edson is an

X-Man? That Nin Andrews is an X-Woman? *But are they poets? Is it poetry?* To which I say, finally, your question doesn't interest me. We shape things. We have powers. What else is there? Innovators should not be ashamed that we refused the jobs of curators. We're not lost; we're not a threat; there is no pure form that we drifted away from. Let the temple be ruined: that's what happens to temples. The necessary forms and the great beauties are the ones we see in the distance, ahead of us.