

WHOLE BRAIN POETRY



AN INTERVIEW WITH RUSSELL EDSON

The following abridged interview was conducted by Peter Johnson, Editor of the journal The Prose Poem. It first appeared, in full, in Writers' Chronicle (USA).

PJ: *What do you think accounts for the recent prose poem renaissance? So many current collections contain both verse and prose poetry. Even Robert Pinsky's The Want Bone, has a long prose poem in it. Moreover, there are four recent anthologies, at least five critical studies, and a few journals dedicated to prose poetry, though you still don't see many prose poems in those Best American Poetry series or in the Pushcart Prizes. And you rarely, if ever, see books of prose poetry winning the thousand or so contests out there.*

RE: Being isolated, what I know of prose poetry comes mostly from your journal. Each issue proves there are an amazing number of people writing them. In some ways, ways of writing are like styles of clothing. Hem lines rise and fall. What's out one year is in the next year. Maybe prose poets are fashion-conscious animals. Other kinds of animals seem to wear the same styles of clothes for centuries and more. Some of us are even monkey-see, monkey-do types. Not to mention that prose poems have that easy-to-write look. But I agree that although there seems to be great interest in the prose poem today, it hasn't gotten the legitimacy of regular or lineated verse. Which is good from my point of view. Boxes tend to dry up my creativity. The prose poem allows the individual to create his or her own boundaries. It's a naked way to write...

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RE: The good writer tries to write beyond genre. That hypothetical community you mention means nothing to the real business of writing. And, in the end, the only value any literary award has is its dollar worth, so that one ends up an old man with a mouth black with caviar and eyes red with Bloody Marys. Without a wink from heaven what does human approval mean?

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RE: What name one gives or doesn't give to his or her writing is far less important than the work itself. I called my first published books fables,

looking, with the help of this label, for a way to describe the pieces I had been writing since sexual awareness. But fables are message stories, and I don't like messages. Fairy tales say in their openings, we're not real, but we're fun. My purpose has always been reality, and it still is. At that time in my career, the term prose poetry seemed more related to French toast or French fries. I learned to write by writing; but with an intuition for a way that wasn't more than what I could bring to it. Something having no more pretension than a child's primer. Which may be its own pretension. Today the current coinage, "prose poem", seems to fit my description without too much fuss. What's in a name... Or, as Gertrude Stein might say, a rose is a rose is a rose...

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RE: While most writers hope to do original work, they finally settle into mainstream mediocrity. There is a strong ovine element in most that watches what the rest of the flock is doing. Everyone wants to succeed one way or another. Still, if one cannot accept failure and scorn, how is he to make his art? It's like wanting to go to heaven without dying.

There is too much emphasis on genre vis-à-vis the prose poem. For me the spirit of the prose poem is writing without genre; to go naked with only one's imagination.

PJ: *How do you see the sometimes problematic relationship between poetry and prose, which causes so many poets, critics, and anthologists anxiety? I've seen your poems in anthologies of "sudden fictions", "microfictions", and "modern parables." And yet you consider yourself to be a prose poet.*

RE: "Sudden fiction", "micro fiction", etc. are dodges, and even more artificial sounding than the term prose poem. The term prose poem at first glance may seem an oxymoron, until one remembers that the opposite of prose is verse. And that the opposite of poetry is fiction; that verse itself does not a poem make, nor does prose alone a fiction make. In simplified terms, fiction is consciousness language. Poetry is a thing of gesture and sign, and almost a non-language art. Poetry and fiction are two sides of the same coin. But neither succeeds without being something of the other. Pure poetry, for instance, is silence. It was fiction that taught poetry how to speak. The personal journey of the prose-poem writer recapitulates this process. It's a primitive pleasure enjoyed by intuitive simpletons.

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RE: The best advice I can give is to ignore advice. Life is just too short to be distracted by the opinions of others. The main thing is to get going with your work however you see it. If you can't do it on your own, it's

probably something that's not worth your doing. The beginning writer has only to write to find his art. It's not a matter of talent. We're all talented. Desire and patience takes us where we want to go. The world is a strange place, it helps to think of oneself as a secret agent.

PJ: *You mentioned earlier that you wanted your poetry to have "no more pretensions than a child's primer", and in "Portrait of a Writer as a Fat Man", you disparage the poet who "neglects content for form; thus, in extremity, form becomes content. The ersatz sensibility that crushes the vitality; the how-to poets with their endless discussion of breath and line; the polishing of the jewel until it turns to dust."* It's clear that you truly dislike self-consciousness in poetry, which besides ruining poems, accounts for idiosyncratic theories on poetry or impassioned, personal manifestos. "An Historical Breakfast" seems to satirize this self-consciousness and narcissism. And yet how do we poets avoid being self-conscious "with all those yet-to-be-born eyes of the future watching"?

RE: Yes, that's a fun piece, a sketch of a harmless monster, encumbered by the yet -to-be-born eyes of the future. But the piece is too silly to have the reality necessary for satire, though it can be taken that way.

But on the business of content and form, simply said, an empty poem is like an empty coffin full of nothing but padding. A mental coffin, as it were, without an exquisite corpse or a psychological body.

In the first place I write to be entertained. Which means surprised. A good many poets write out of what they call experience. This seems deadened. For me the poem itself, the act of writing it, is the experience, not all the dark crap behind it. To quote Robert Bly, or the Captain, as I like to call him, in his *American Poetry (Wilderness and Domesticity)*: "In art, I want to see the 'unknown' looking at me." I want this, too, particularly in my own work.

PJ: *And yet, in spite of your insistence on impersonality, I think of you as being one of the most original writers of your generation.*

RE: Isolation, like virtue, is its own reward. I like the idea of one's own shop. The idea of the homemade and the simple. Simple is as simple does. It takes a simpleton. I'm the right man for the job. If I've done anything special, and of course I have, it's just by doing what anybody could have if they thought it worth doing. It's understandable that writers want to work with what they consider important themes. I go the other way. I like making something out of almost nothing at all. It leaves room to imagine rather than retelling what one already knows. I think of myself more as an inventor than a decorator.

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RE: Early on I looked for the company of other writers, “a community of writers to have a conversation with”, as you once put it. That’s normal and encouraging, but something I never found. Been digging the same hole for years. So it is that Little Mr Prose Poem is currently not doing much thinking that would interest anyone. His ideas haven’t changed over the years because there hasn’t been anything to change for lack of ideas. There’s only the writing, which I admit to knowing very little about. But then it’s probably best not to know. It allows one to work without expectation. Best to let the poem do the thinking while we concern ourselves with what’s called the personal life.

Unfortunately, poetry now is a social club. One has not only to write well, if one can, but be a social creature. The social part is probably the most important part. And I ain’t social. Actually, one doesn’t really have to write too well if one is a pleasant person to find a career in writing. But it’s not the proper field for a hermit. He would do better cultivating mushrooms in the cave of his thoughts. Communing with bats that live in his personalised belfry.

PJ: *But can't an exaggerated isolation, continuous uninterrupted time with oneself, nurture the kind of self-consciousness you want to avoid?*

RE: If self-consciousness is inevitable, as the saying goes, relax and enjoy it. Still, my best pieces seem written by someone, or something, else. I don’t mean “automatic writing”, or “stream-of-consciousness”, exactly, but writing in such a way that one dreams while being fully awake. Being able to critique (the act of the good editor) as the work begins to form on the page. In a sense, this kind of writing needs to be orderly and compact because it has no set borders. There’s only room for working parts. The writer needs the courage to drop “good stuff” for the sake of the poem’s psychological movement. Another fault occurs with the writer who doesn’t trust his imagination and does too much situating, or scene-setting. The result is too many words chasing too few ideas. Remember, words are the enemy of poetry.

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RE: Your students who fall back on Breton’s “automatic writing” are under the delusion that anything goes. Well, it doesn’t. A piece of writing must not only have the logic of language, but the logic of composition. Automatic writing doesn’t begin anyplace, and doesn’t end anyplace. It’s like a digestive system without a defined mouth or an asshole. A poem is a mental object and requires one’s best mental abilities. We work best

when our intellects and imaginations are in harmony at the time of the writing. But I like to go real fast before I ruin what I'm writing by thinking about it. This is not automatic writing. It's looking for the shape of thought more than the particulars of the little narrative. But why should we have to be surrealists? Breton didn't invent our imaginations.

PJ: *What do you mean by the shape of thought?*

RE: It has to do with an abstract argument between reality and the organ of reality (the brain). This means I cannot afford to violate the logic of the prose. My pieces, when they work, though full of odd happenings, win the argument against disorder through the logic of language and a compositional wholeness. So my ideal prose poem is a small, complete work, utterly logical within its own madness. This is different than surrealism, which usually takes the commonplace and makes it strange, and leaves it there.

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RE: Dreaming awake, as I've called it, means being fully conscious while tapping into the subconscious or dream mind. This is what any creative writer does. Writers have been doing this for centuries before Breton stumbled upon Freud. Anything that seems a bit odd is labeled surrealism. So many so-called surrealist poems come across as stylized fakes, as very conscious attempts to be strange. My desire has always been to argue the case for reality. A good example is found in the works of Kafka, who explored the vaunted dreamscape, and yet was able to report it in rational and reasoned language. Language is sanity. We all teeter on the border of dream and consciousness. To pretend insanity is insulting, both to the clinically insane, and to those of us who strive for reality. Dreams, no matter how absurd or strange, are believable because they make physical sense. It's the same creative process as found in poems. The big difference is that dreams are almost totally without language. Still the poem and the dream arise from the same place. It's a place of image and gesture. Which makes a poem a miraculous contradiction. Which also makes the writing of the same an act of sanity: whole-brain thinking. Language is consciousness, but the source of the creative is not. It's all a kind of dreaming awake. Again, whole brain thinking. This is at least what I've come to in my own writing. It really comes down to an intuition more than a technique.

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RE: Okay, so I'm a neo-surrealist. That's still better than being a neo-fascist. But if I'm anything *neo* it's not by design; more by blunder and, in

the beginning, an unfocused passion for the arts. One must grant that Breton was right to see the importance of dream thinking. It is the source of the creative energy. I think all people in the arts tap this whether they know it or not, and always have. But, as I mentioned above, there is a dirty little secret about dreams: they are mostly, if not entirely, nonverbal. Dreams create their art works at night in a language of signs, images, gestures, and metaphor, all in a dumb show. The subconscious doesn't know how to speak in the conscious language. Trying to put a dream into words is like trying to translate a painting into words. This is the difficulty with poetry. The poet has to create into language something that has no language. Dreaming awake, as I've called it, means being fully conscious while also dreaming. Not falling asleep on the job, but with a conscious eye to composition—the good editor, as it were. Insanity is always at the elbow, and so I try for order on the page. The insane lose that border between the subconscious and consciousness, and come to frozen laughter. Perhaps that's what the surrealists were looking for as a way of opening a new age.

PJ: *All well and good, but what do you say to the student who says, "I love these wacky Edson poems, but what do they mean?"*

RE: I don't know exactly. But I don't need to know. As I've said, I am more interested in the shape of thought than the actual thought. The poem thinks well. So the prose poem wants to make some wacky physical sense. It's a matter of simplicity, of being able to think in a physical way. More gesture than word. The hell with reality and meaning. What the writer finds on his page is only the dry, whispery hiss of meaning. This is what makes writing the most human of the arts. One shouldn't have to explain anything to the reader. My approach is to grasp the seemingly irrational and to make something rational of it. To enter sanity by entering sanity's back door. Unless one is describing something entirely different than what one knows of the given world, description is deadly to a prose poem. You were right when you once said that the whole prose poem is the metaphor. Not just in a formal sense, but also in the sense of high art (the artificial, the man-made) with the poignant sense of the tragically real. The art that laughs at itself with most serious purpose. I never liked the term "experimental writing", but what else is a prose poem? Having written a number of them, I still don't know how they're written.

PJ: *Even though it's silly to symbol-hunt or search for a one-to-one correspondence in your work, I still see some kind of referentiality at work—in short,*

some kind of meaning, even in the broadest sense of the word. Consider "The Large Thing." By following its shape of thought, one of my students suggested it was a comic glance at uncertainty or insatiability, or a parody of that kind of thinking process.

RE: Again the question of satire, and again its possibility. But as I say, I write for amusement, not to change others. I don't know what The Large Thing is, or even what it means. Its movement in and out of the piece has its own reason in logic. I write as a reader, not knowing what the author will say next. The piece is simple and mysterious, as is the soliloquist of the piece, known only as someone. It's really the way I like to write. An abstract something in motion within its own terms. It might be noted how amused infants are by the famous peekaboo game, which starts with the sense of loss, quickly relieved by the return of the mother.

The Captain goes the other way. He's the soliloquist of his poems. His poems have purpose and are written to do things, such as moral instruction, and beautifully worked nature studies that portray the poet as an alert and sensitive observer of things that many of us might have missed. He is his poems. I, on the other hand, want nothing to do with what I write except the fun of writing it. For me, writing is another life lived in another place, an artificial creation organized like a dream.

Charlie Simic speaks to this in his introduction to the prose poem feature published in a past volume of *Verse*, saying, "Others pray to God. I pray to chance to show me the way out of this prison I call myself." I understand in a very personal way what he means. One sometimes needs a vacation from the idea of oneself. The prose poem is the perfect vacation spot. I've been going there for years.

PJ: *Even though it's difficult to think of Bly writing a poem without having a theory about it, he still, especially in his prose poems collected in What Have I Ever Lost by Dying?, succeeds in achieving a certain universality. In other words, any theories he has usually do not destroy his overriding impulse to escape from personality into the object. The Language poets also strive for impersonality, and yet I see their work as being very different from yours. I would think they would be more interested in the shape of language than the shape of thought.*

RE: Unfortunately I don't know that particular book by Bly. But whatever theories the Captain comes up with, and he has lots of them, at least they're fun and full of imaginative energy with the worthy enthusiasm of a little boy in a toy shop. This is a far cry from the dour, hard-line, so-called Language poets, who are like painters who, instead of painting,

spend their days smelling their brushes and easels thinking that a new age is about to dawn.

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RE: Metonymy? Synecdoche? You do me too much honor. I know this will sound strange, but it is possible to do a few things on one's own. Movements bore me. They're usually peopled by those needing umbrellas even when it's not raining, serious little Marxists with their manifestos and their "new" baloney. We all know what the proof of the pudding is, and it's not some overworked political recipe. *What a Man Can See* is not an anomaly. Other people write anomalies. I always write what needs to be written at the time of its writing. The main thing is the creative lust, the immediate need to make something. Theory then comes too late. In this sense the completed work becomes the theory of itself.

Of course I saw that in the future there would be others trying this road, and hoped that they would see that this kind of writing could only lead to the smelling of brushes and easels, seeking the bitch of meaning, as it were.

PJ: *When you did abandon radical linguistic experimentation after What a Man Can See, your work does seem more content-driven, and you seem to accept a certain recognizable way of writing. We know an Edson poem when we see one. I can think of other writers with equally recognizable styles: Stein and Hemingway, for instance. These styles are easy to parody, and some of the worst of Hemingway and of Stein read like parodies of some of the best of Hemingway and of Stein. I have heard people complain that sometimes your work seems too predictable because you rely on the same simple Dick and Jane style. How would you respond to that criticism?*

RE: I've read parodies of my work. And often they were as good or even better than what I've done. As I've said, anybody could write like Edson if they wanted to. I find myself doing it all the time. The famous Czech poet, Dr Miroslav Holub, who is also a medical scientist, finds him infectious, and says that when he reads Russell Edson he becomes Russell Edson. Of course he understands this is not a good idea. And, from personal experience, I can attest to this. At least Dr Holub could escape Russell Edson, if he would. I'm trapped, as the Captain once put it.

This Russell Edson, as part of his baggage, values the articles of speech as the most beautiful parts of the language. He counts three, but there may be more. He's still looking. Though he may favor the indefinite ones, he loves them all, the way they give thingness to the world. He would, if it were possible, write with only these three beautiful words. But without a

proper disciplining what can one do with only three words? This is why he's in constant search for other English articles.

Of course it's always good fun for a critic to put a writer against himself. It's sort of an I-gotcha-game where the author is squeezed into a small cage of the critic's description, while the critic pokes him through the bars.

I've never seen anything wrong with Dick and Jane. Some might say, well, that's what's wrong with you. I say back, there's nothing wrong with me, albeit nothing right, either, except perhaps my politics. Again this is all part of Russell Edson's baggage. Modernism is the disease of the proclaimed avant-gardes.

PJ: *Earlier, you complained about the need of Language poetry to find a theory for itself. Do you think since Pound and Eliot that American poetry, in general, has become too bogged down in theory?*

RE: Overweening Poundcake has always seemed to me the rhetorical triumph of personality and mannerism over product. Whatever you might think of Eliot, who has been referred to as Tough-Shit Eliot by those who haven't found his nervous twitterings too attractive, he is the better poet by far, writing some very compelling lyrics to a point.

Theories? This is why it is best to imagine one's skull as a chamber of fetal hair waiting to sprout into a fetching pompadour. Incidentally, the basic recipe for poundcake is a pound of flour, a pound of butter, and a pound of sugar...

PJ: *You mentioned Bly before. What was it like during the '70s when you, Bly, Tate, and others were writing prose poems? Was there a lot of dialogue among you about the form? How did you come to know these people?*

RE: Back then, as you probably know, prose poems were illegal. Jim Tate and the Captain and I had begun to meet secretly, never meeting twice in the same place for fear of the poetry police. It was a heady time, the world had suddenly become new, the heavier-than-air flying machine had just been invented, Eiffel was building a tower made of iron, I forget just where, but everything seemed to be opening at once, even as we were designing what would become the literary future of America. We were all in our teens, which accounts for our belief in the future. We were teenage visionaries.

After long evenings of talking prose poems we'd relax by trying to guess who was ghostwriting all the stuff that was appearing in all the

poetry magazines. It looked like the work of a single hack. We never found out. But, like most unsolved murders, the books are still open.

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RE: An influence, if it has any positive meaning, is really a kind of permission that allows us to open something in ourselves. It's there, but we have to learn to recognize it. Then one sees a commercial on TV, or reads something in a newspaper, or perhaps sees an oddly shaped cloud, and suddenly one's possibility begins to be suggested.

I suppose my strongest influence was Russell Edson. Although I never quite understood what he was doing, he was doing something that inspired me to feel it was possible to make things out of almost nothing at all. That's a very creative feeling, starting from almost zero and being able to make something that's at least trivial. And sometimes to make something somewhat more than trivial. But trivial will do. At least it's more than the zero of nothing. People tend to aspire to more than they need, when in the end they turn out to be just another corpse belonging to the general ecology.

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RE: I do as little reading as possible. Reading is a busman's holiday. Of all the arts, literature is probably the least attractive. But, of all the arts, the most human and the most disturbing. I like to read, when I can choose it, scientific materials written for the layman. I like to think about the beginnings, the "big bang", that supposedly erupted from something smaller than an atom. Perhaps from nothing at all. I try to understand it emotionally. My intellect can't handle it.

PJ: *Is that why you make fun of physics and astronomy in poems like "The Matter" and "The Dark Side of the Moon?" Your prose poetry seems skeptical of mathematical and philosophical formulas that try to make sense of things. I can't see you as a believer in The Great Chain of Being unless you decide to hang an ape from it.*

RE: It's just my way of showing fondness. Had I the intellect and the training I would rather have worked in science than anything else I've done. And I'll not be the first to say that physics is probably the masterpiece of the twentieth century. In that piece, "The Dark Side of the Moon", I invented a new sea, which no one has questioned. So in a small way I have added something to the atlas of the moon.

PJ: *I've heard you read twice, and both times I enjoyed your ability to improvise. You had the timing of a stand-up comic. What tips would you give to the*

poet, especially the comic poet? It's a terrible feeling to read a funny poem to an audience that expects to witness the profuse, psychic bleeding of one's heart.

RE: There are probably no cultural events so boring as many poetry readings, due, to no small extent, to the fact that a good many of them present self-serious poets who singsong odes to their feelings out of their armpits. I can think of nothing so vulgar as watching a confessional poet's guts slowly oozing out of one of his pant legs. But worse than even these abuses are those awful little scene-setting, folksy anecdotes used to shore up meaningless poems.

Nevertheless, for the shy beginner with a bit of pluck there are some simple techniques to focus the goodwill of an audience. One of the best strategies is to pretend to be hopelessly insane. But if this proves to need more finesse than the beginner can muster, a lisp is another good choice; the idea of someone bravely speaking in public with a pronounced speech defect can be quite touching, particularly to people out for an evening of culture. Even a few properly placed belches punctuated with pretended little pukings into a barf bag can bring an audience to its feet with crescendo approval. But probably the easiest and most affecting way to win an audience is to break into tears at the reading stand. And to weep through the entire reading with your face buried in a handkerchief without having read one piece. I've tried all of the above and more. And yet, oddly enough, I've found that audiences are sometimes grateful for just a straight reading. This needs a little more research.

The main thing to remember is that poetry is very serious stuff...