

From the Boulevard to the Boudoir; The Prose Poem's Evolution from
Baudelaire's Scenes of French Daily Life to Nin Andrew's Contemporary
Portrayal of the Individual

By Caitlin Washburn

Compared to many forms of poetry, the prose poem is one of the most experimental and understated. It is a “genre of poetry, self consciously written, and characterized by the intense use of virtually all devices of verse” (Benedikt 47). By doing away with line breaks, it “uses means of prose toward the ends of poetry” (Lehman 13). Though when speaking of this form only a few long dead French poets may come to mind, “the prose poem has achieved an unprecedented level of popularity among American poets” (Lehman 24). Over time a range of contemporary American poets utilized this French tradition. Nin Andrews has bore her personal experiences on the page, her poetry called “scandalous” “tender” “erotic” and “comic genius”. Her works address a range of themes such as sexuality, suicide, depression, death, love, feminism and many others. Andrews draws upon childhood, adolescence and adulthood memories to create a life uncensored, consistently using the form of the prose poem to tell her stories. Like prose poets who preceded her, Andrews uses the form as an act of rebellion against verse, rhyme and meter, and draws attention to capturing reality through the mode of story telling and metaphor.

The prose poem originated in eighteenth century France under the name “poeme en prose”, but didn’t evolve into its current form until the mid-nineteenth century (Monte 15). There are no particular historical developments that explain its arrival, but the gradual change in aesthetic preferences caused a shift that propagated the rise of the novel (Monte 16, 17). Early examples of the “poem en prose” were more like novels than poems, and for its “eighteenth-century opponents [it] was at best a bad figure of speech; for those who supported the idea of poetry in prose, the term was literal and signified removing merely one of the generic features of the epic, the necessity of

writing in verse” (Monte 17). Fenelon’s “Les Aventures de Télémaque” is an early example of the “poeme en prose” as it can be considered a “prose epic”. Due to social-economic changes and the gradual transition to a market based economy, the increase of a literate population somewhat explains the shift and prose became associated with modernity, clarity, truth, and naturalness in the eighteenth century (Monte 16). “Poeme en prose” had many proponents that were divided into two camps; those who believed that it philosophically argued in the name of truth and those who preferred it for aesthetic reasons. Those who liked it in taste “were not so much interested in the expressive possibilities of prose as they were in doing away with poetry in any form” (Monte 17). Their contribution was the aesthetic of unmediated expression, which manifested itself through nature poetry, the fragment, dream literature, night poetry, and most forms which critics would classify as “pre-romantic” (Monte 18). The prose poem’s lack of success in the early nineteenth century left it as an experimental form which appealed to the increasingly romantic age and as a more attractive option than free verse (Monte 21). Even considering these developments, the modern prose poem would not be what it is today without Baudelaire’s influence.

Baudelaire had a firm belief in capturing both the horror and ecstasy of daily life. This was in part influenced by his paternal father Joseph Francois Baudelaire.

“On 10 February 1827, Francois Baudelaire died, leaving his young widow to care for their sensitive, precocious child. Though only six, Charles was never to forget his father’s affection, courtesy and elegant eighteenth century manners. On their long walks in the Luxembourg garden, the distinguished old gentleman would talk seriously to his young son, pointing out to him the beauties of art and

architecture. It was undoubtedly such memories that helped to shape the manners of the future poet – particularly the extreme politeness thought by many to be mere affection and to encourage his taste for the visual arts” (Hyslop 2).

After Baudelaire’s father died however, his life began to spiral out of control. His strict step father caused him to rebel and explore a bohemian lifestyle. His sensitivity and exposure to the darker parts of world allowed him to capture life’s essence in his poetry.

Baudelaire was concerned with presenting his prose poems differently from the definitions of it that came before him (Monte 65). Instead of concerning himself with the past he focused on the present. His works created music, an energetic portrayal of reality, rather than the landscapes and portraits. He captured the sites and sounds of the urban experience, which inevitably made his style unique. “Baudelaire believed strongly in the poetic craft and had doubts about the prose poem on grounds of exactitude”, and though his poems seem to be relinquishing form he crafted them with the desire to create a new one (Monte 65). He was always in control of his medium and blamed himself for producing something other than he had resolve to create, even if it was a powerful work (Monte 66). The focus was on above all else to invoke the exact image he wished to capture in his poems, which explains his constant self-criticism and negativity toward his creations.

Inspired by Aloysius Bertrand’s “Gaspard de la Nuit”, Baudelaire’s collection of prose poems known today as *Le Spleen de Paris* attempted to extract beauty from everyday life. Unlike Bertrand who was in line with the tastes of the Romanticists, Baudelaire tried to capture as many gritty details as possible in his poems. His letter to Arsene Houssaye describes Bertrand’s extensive influence on his work. He begins by

stating that though *Le Spleen de Paris* seems to have a continuous plot line, if one takes away a few key plot points “it has neither head nor tail, since on the contrary, everything in it is both tail and head” (Kaplan 129). The way each poem flows into the next gives the illusion of a superfluous plot, but they can exist separately as well. Baudelaire confesses that *Le Spleen de Paris* was his attempt at something similar to “Gaspard de la Nuit” but he wished to “apply to the description of modern life” as Bertrand “had applied to the depiction of ancient life” (Kaplan 129). Baudelaire tried to capture the dream “of the miracle of the prose poem, musical without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and choppy enough to fit the soul’s lyrical movements” (Kaplan 129). The themes he chose for his poems come from the streets of Paris.

“I was making something (if that can be called something) peculiarly different, an accident of which anyone other than I would be proud, but which can only deeply humiliate a mind that considers as the poet’s greatest honor to execute exactly what he planned to do” (Kaplan 130).

Though Baudelaire was heavily influenced by others such as Bertrand, *Le Spleen de Paris* offers a text with no real precedent. The way which these poems present the consciousness by melding two literary modes creates the boundaries of the modern prose poem, offering a new literary model. Because of the lack of any precursory guidelines for the prose poem it is “generally agreed that Baudelaire’s prose poems constitute the model which was to determine the parameters of the genre and validate all such literary enterprises in the future” (Benedikt 44). For these reasons, *Le Spleen de Paris* is one of the most important collections of Baudelaire’s work for the evolution of the prose poem.

The poetic tales in *Le Spleen de Paris* each contribute to “the narrator’s restless search for community and family” beginning with a clash between fantasy and reality until reaching a point of meaninglessness and despair, ending finally on a “literary act of friendship” (Kaplan xx). In this the form of the prose poem acts as a “dialogically open-ended literary unity, ambiguity and judgment kindness and cruelty anger and generosity, reverie and analysis” (Kaplan xxi). *Le Spleen de Paris* addresses the reader through conversational situations. “L’estranger” for example reflects a communicational failure between two men from different classes.

“Tell me, whom do you love the most, you enigmatic man? your father, your mother, your sister, or your brother?”

‘I have neither father, nor mother, nor sister, nor brother.’

‘Your friends?’

‘There you use a word whose meaning until now has remained to me unknown.’

‘Your fatherland?’

‘I am unaware in what latitude it lies.’

‘Beauty?’

‘I would willingly love her, goddess and immortal’

‘Gold?’

‘I hate it as you hate God.’

‘So! Then what do you love, you extraordinary stranger?’

‘I love clouds...drifting clouds...there...over there...marvelous clouds!’”

(Kaplan 1).

The questions asked by the poem “represent the position of a socialized individual, the man who by association with his suggestions of what might be important to the interlocutor” but inevitably the other cannot recognize his language, as they come from two different cultural backgrounds. The reader comes into the poem expecting certain modes of discourse and by subtly altering those modes, Baudelaire’s work breaks free of ideological restraints. These “complex narratives and linguistic strategies used to manipulate reader response also imply a rhetoric which could be seen to be the intersection of register and reception” (Stephens 19). The reader, who is not able to understand the poem’s form from previous references, has to conceptualize it based on their individual experiences (Stephens 19). The prose poem allows Baudelaire to transgress the established boundary between poem and prose, moving away from conventional structures. He supersedes traditional literary boundaries by “introducing a different sort of discourse, literary and extra literary” unsettling the audience by introducing “extra generic possibilities into the confines of a specific generic space” (Stephens 20). Baudelaire’s prose poetry plays with the audience by altering their train of thought, and the form allows the reader to meld the elusive traits of poetry with the formulaic progression of prose.

The prose poem now has been a form explored by poets for almost two and a half centuries. “Although a well known, even venerable genre world wide, it is only recently that English speaking poets, particularly Americans, have ‘discovered’ the prose poem” (Benedikt 40). Post Baudelaire, the prose poem continued down the path he set forth. “Poeme en prose” became popular in France because it represented “freedom from the alexandrine, the tyrannical twelve syllable line that ruled over

French poetry with an inflexibility that made English blank verse seem positively
 Libertine” (Lehman 18). Rimbaud’s prose poems mimicked Baudelaire’s as he
 considered himself a follower. “Royalty” for example, uses a narrative voice to tell a
 surreal tale of two lovers who were king and queen for a day.

“One fine morning, in a land of very gentle people, a magnificent man and
 woman called out at the very center of town: ‘My friends, I want her to be
 Queen!’ ‘And I want to be Queen!’ she laughed and trembled. He was telling his
 friends of a trial that had now been ended, of an ordeal they had both been
 through. They swooned, they fell all over each other.

And, actually, they were royalty for an entire morning while once again
 crimson draperies were hung out over all the houses; and for an entire afternoon,
 while they strolled along toward the Palm Gardens” (Benedikt 95).

The careful choices of wording to make each an idea is reminiscent of Baudelaire’s call
 to perfection. Mallarme’s poetry called for self questioning art, a form of consciousness
 shared by Baudelaire. This can be seen in an excerpt from his poem “The White
 Waterlily.”

“I had been rowing for a long while with wide, sweeping rhythmical strokes,
 with inward eyes fixed upon complete forgetfulness of motion, as on all sides
 the laughter of that hour rippled on. So much immobility was aiding me in idling
 away the hour that, when suddenly tapped awake by a dull sound struck by my
 boat I could only tell that I had stopped by way of the insistent sparkling of
 initials on the lifted oars; only then was I recalled to my place in the world of
 reality” (Benedikt 76).

Henri Michaux used cunning characters in his prose poetry to portray a story. In “The Jetty” the ghostly old man pulls up things he once found to be riches in life but nothing seemed satisfactory in death.

“A murmur came from my right. It was a man sitting like me with legs swinging and looking at the sea. ‘Now that I am old,’ he said, ‘I am going to pull up everything I have put there during the years.’ He began to draw things up by means of pulleys” (Benedikt 148).

Francis Ponge “took the side of objects” in poems that spurred the self-conscious ego and discovered themselves as the studies of things” (Lehman 18). These poets development of the genre undoubtedly made Paris the prose poem capital of the World. It wasn’t until the 1960s when international poetry gained status as a response to vast social political changes, and that the prose poem caught on in the English speaking world.

Michael Benedikt, American poet and poetic scholar, explains five important elements of contemporary prose poetry. First Baudelaire’s idea of the “necessity to attend to ‘pricklings of the consciousness’” (Benedikt 48). Robert Bly and other poets of the 1960s attended the priorities of the unconscious and found that line breaks were no longer desirable, thus making the prose poetry an ideal form. His poem “A Small Bird’s Nest Made of White Reed Fiber” explores how images of the outward world can affect a person within.

“It’s a white nest! White as the foam thrown up when the sea hits rocks. Some light comes through it; we get the feeling of those cloudy transoms above Victorian doors, or the manless hair of those intense nurses, gray and tangled

after long nights in the Crimean wars. It is something made and then forgotten, like our own lives that we will entirely forget in the grave, when we are floating, nearing the shore where we will be reborn, ecstatic and black” (Benedikt 477).

Bly’s connection between poetry and simplicity flow naturally with the form of the prose poem in this example.

The second property of prose poems is the necessity for everyday speech. In the romantic period Wordsworth and Coleridge emphasized this in their own poems as they saw it as a means of projecting the individual imagination. As for integrating colloquial dialect, “few poets have gone as far as prose poets in terms of finding a diction significantly varies to be adequate to the unconscious” (Benedikt 48). The tone that the prose poem can offer helps by giving a “tough mindedness to the representation of the traditionally ‘delicate’ tentative calm of the inward imagination” (Benedikt 48). Merwin is an extreme example of matter-of-fact poise and tough mindedness, as seen in his poem “The Dachau Shoe.”

“My cousin Gene (he’s really only a second cousin) has a shoe he picked up at Dachau. It’s a pretty worn-out shoe. It wasn’t top quality in the first place, he explained. The sole is cracked clear across and has pulled loose from the upper on both sides, and the upper is split at the ball of the foot. There’s no lace and there’s no heel.

He explained he didn’t steal it because it must have belonged to a Jew who was dead. He explained that he wanted some little thing. He explained that the Russians looted everything. They just took everything. He explained that it wasn’t top quality to begin with. He explained that he was lucky to have got

anything. He explained that it wasn't wrong because the Germans were defeated. He explained that everybody was picking up something. A lot of guys wanted flags or daggers or medals or things like that, but that kind of thing didn't appeal to him so much. He kept it on the mantelpiece for a while but he explained that it wasn't a trophy" (Benedikt 498).

Merwin's blunt representation of the traditionally delicate realm of poetry portrays a respect in the security of the unconscious. According to Benedikt this transition has allowed the prose poem to evolve into being direct as any handbook.

Thirdly, following the insistence on reality of the unconscious and the imagination, there is a visionary boldness to prose poetry. The use of many tones of voice, blunt or not, "suggests a highly relativistic relation to an idea of a 'given' reality" (Benedikt 49). Prose poetry can offer a psychologically realistic means for poets, where reality can become pliable. It is subject to a kind of improvement by means of ways of viewing it, and in turn a relativistic approach can also take into account the collapse of the vision as well. James Wright's "Handsome is as Handsome Does" portrays multiple perspectives while he is taking in the scenery.

"In this moment I am sitting contented and alone in a perfect charming little park near the Palazzo Scaligeri in Verona, pondering the state of my soul and glimpsing the mists of early autumn as they shift and fade among the pines and city battlements on the hills to my left above the river Adige.

The river has recovered from this morning's rainfall. It is now restoring to its shapely body its own secret light, a color of faintly cloudy green and pearl.

Directly in front of my Bench perhaps thirty yards away from me, there is a startling woman. She is as black as the inmost secret of light in a perfectly cut diamond, a perilous black, a secret that must have been studied for many years before the anxious and disciplined craftsman could achieve the necessary balance between courage and skill to stroke the strange stone and take the one chance he would ever have to bring that black secret to light.

While I was trying to compose the preceding sentence, the woman rose from her park bench and walked away. I am afraid her black secret will never come to light in my lifetime.

And I'll be a son of a bitch if I don't have a case of stone-ache.

Wait! Wait a moment. Seize the day.

She just came into the park again and sat down" (Benedikt 486).

Wright's different perceptions of the woman as he considers her allows reality to take on multiple meanings. There is the reality of his environment, his self as he's writing, his emotions and his opinions of her. They blend together to create a fullness to reality as it is not simply made of one view

The fourth aspect is that "there is in this sophisticatedly realistic approach often a certain humor...one which truly registers the fluctuating motions of consciousness, and which subsumes ordinary ideas of 'poetic' gravity or decorum" (Benedikt 49).

Because of this wit is not only required on an esthetic level; but beyond this a fulfillment of a philosophical responsibility. The way prose poetry allows freedom to express the unconscious mind also allows humor to flow effortlessly. It may take

different forms, so long as it expresses the whole unadulterated truth. Russell Edson's dark sense of humor can be perceived in his poem "Rat Fever."

"A rat owns a man, which it operates with apron strings from its rathole in the wall.

The rat has the man to sit on a chair and to have his hands on his knees, and to sit there and to think, which for the largeness of the man's head he is supposed to do.

When the man's mother visits him he says he is a rat's thing.

Because the woman would tie the man to her apron and cause him to go away with her, the rat pulls the excuse-me-string, and the man excuses himself for the bathroom.

Then the rat pulls the prepare-to-cut-string, and the man takes out his razor.

Then the rat pulls the cut-one's-throat-string, and the man cuts his own throat.

When the mother finally goes to see what keeps her son she finds him dead with his throat cut.

She sees apron strings coming out of one of his pants legs, and follows them back to a hole in the wall where a rat's eyes are beady, looking out at her.

She ties the strings to her apron and begins to dance. This drags the rat out by the fingers of its paws.

As she dances the rat is swung against the walls, until it is dead.

The blood of her son returns to his throat. His throat becomes uncut. He returns the razor to its place.

He says, I dreamed I was a rat's thing.

No, you are my thing, she says as she ties him to her apron" (Benedikt 533).

The absurd nature of rat and the woman playing marionettes with the man's life portrays a cynical sense of humor in regards to the man being subjected to either the lowliest of creatures or his mother. It is able to function in the capacity of both being weighty and able to elicit a chuckle.

The fifth and final element Benedikt believes characterizes the contemporary prose poem is, "a kind of enlightened doubtfulness or hopeful skepticism" (Benedikt 49). Given the implications that the individual imagination is all-important, this element is with regard to the pervasively oppressive realities which remain resistant to even a healthy relativist approach. This posture may take into account not only objects, places and situations, but also different ideas of reality. Anne Sexton expresses this feeling in her poem "The Window That Watched the Pru."

"I have never cut my hair. That's something you ought to know right off.

It fills the room the way ten giraffes would, twisting and twisting their long innocent necks. My hair is innocent, too. It knows no better.

I have one window in this room and from it can see over the countryside. The lilacs in April blushing like ten-year-old ballet dancers. The snows of Valentine's Day laid out as smooth and as humped as a dentist's chair. And then there is the clock tower, striking the hour as faithful as the town crier. But today,

this May 25, the new leaves are green. They are my green ladies. They sing.
They call out to me. They are the Christs of the grass.

But at night I watch the lights in the blackness. At night, along the stars,
those neon jacks, I watch the Pru and under it the skyline of Boston. The Pru
stands up like an electrified totem pole. And the planes jet over from Chicago on
their way to Logan Airport. In their bellies they carry one hundred and twenty
people. I am alone. I am in my room. The room is my belly. It carries me”
(Sexton 521).

Her consideration of the outside world versus her confines portrays a woman with
hopefulness for the beauty of the city, but doubtfulness of her ability to fit into it. These
five elements as shown above are integral to deciphering the modern American prose
poem.

One contemporary prose poet who has added to the contemporary prosaic genre
is Nin Andrews. Born in Virginia to a family of six, Andrews’ accessible language and
colloquial style reflects the down to earth environment she grew up in. Influenced by
her father who was an Architect, Andrews always envied writers and painters (McNiece
and Smith 23). Watching her father paint Andrews noted his love and devotion for the
process.

“He would sit on the porch and water color one painting after another and each
one he would toss like a dead leaf. What amazed me was his love for the process,
his intensity of focus that time out of time – when he was basically just painting.
And how he was never satisfied with the results” (McNiece and Smith 23).

This hunger and urgency she witnessed to capture the moment is reflected in her poetry today. Each poem exemplifies a careful attention to detail, revealing meaning through the careful portrayal of her experiences. By using the surreal nature of memory, her stories are able to jump place to place with only a slight tangible connection. Her collections *Sleeping with Houdini*, *The Book of Orgasms* and *Southern Comfort* all deal with the lessons learned from childhood to adulthood, and each individual poem holds its own story. Andrews' choice in using the prose poem is deliberate and thoughtful, as it allows her to accomplish many things that the line break would not allow her to.

Sleeping with Houdini captures the real and surreal life through vivid images and metaphors. She strives to capture her reality using crisp, vivid imagery and avoid lofty metaphors. "Déjà Vu" describes a scene shared between a couple in order to show a relationship in the season of its decline.

"The first time I met you, I knew you would leave me. It would happen suddenly, perhaps on Thursday. Already I possessed the memory of it. An autumn evening spent like so many drab moments, tiny gray ones, followed by a week of shadows. Perhaps it occurred while watching each other through a haze of exhaustion and cigarette smoke. At dusk in some dingy restaurant, the candles sputtering, and outside, rain gushing through the drainpipes, winged maple seeds spinning past our window" (Andrews, *Houdini* 41).

The close attention to using a choice of very specific details that all contribute to the presentation of the fall. The "drab moments", "shadows", "rain gushing through drainpipes", and "haze" describe the autumn evening, rather than Andrews thoughts and feelings about it. Like Rimbaud she gives direct treatment to and has every word

contribute to the image she wishes to create. Unlike Rimbaud however, Andrews doesn't hesitate to make this personal.

“We didn't even notice the change at first. Everything looked so tired. Even the apartment buildings looming across the street like lit honeycombs kept closing their shades. And the truth is never obvious anymore. Why should it be? Habit prevents us from noticing the subtle changes - the feeling that everyone is holding his breath, like the hush when a symphony stops playing, and nobody blows his nose. We hear in the orchestra, not Mozart or a drum beat, but the drip of a faucet. Each drop is our universe, waiting to fall” (Andrews, *Houdini* 41).

Andrews' use of precise metaphors captures the abstract emotions in the second half of “Déjà Vu”. The “looming” buildings, the terse “hush” of a symphony's silence, and the repetitive and painful sound of a dripping faucet blend together to invoke the tension between these lovers.

Occasionally Andrews dabbles in the surrealist style, shown in her poem “Black Magic”. Similar to the French poetry of Henri Michaux, she connects a string of non-sequitur images together to conjure an emotion without directly expressing it. The similarities between the French Surrealists and Andrews seem apparent in the first part of her poem.

“He said, according to William James, there are laws psychology. If you form a picture in your mind of what you would like or wish, and you hold that picture long enough, you produce what you are thinking. In this way monks in certain Himalayan monasteries manifest women out of thin air while balancing cups of steaming gooseberry tea on their cocks. I understand this now, he said, all the

laws of psychology. And how my thoughts have been travelling beneath your skin” (Andrews, *Houdini* 49).

This poem also bears resemblance to the works of Andre Breton, principally “Less Time”. Like the different descriptions of time connecting Breton’s poem, Andrews frequently uses variation of terms to describe controlling thought. Breton however was a firm believer in automatism, which does not seem to be the case with Andrews. The end of her poem provides a moral to the reader.

“He said, you’ve become a mere figment of my imagination, a silhouette, lit by my mind. Or my own grief. I even know what you fear. The day I will say to myself, *this woman is not all she’s cracked up to be*. The day you’ll think, *this woman is a real son of a witch*. And the flicker of anger singes our skins. That’s always the beginning, the taste of bitterness and salt when we first lick the surface of our tiny black hearts” (Andrews, *Houdini* 49).

The last line implies though one can wish and use magic to control the thoughts of the other, it only leads them to “lick the surface of [their] tiny black hearts”. The intention of this ending is to imply that though the other ideas seem disjointed, they are not random. Furthermore Andrews tells a story, which is not a hallmark of automatist surrealism but of prose poetry.

Andrews has a great many stories to tell. Through the medium of the prose poem she is not only able to convey the anecdotes of her life, but also the internal complexity of her thoughts. In *The Book of Orgasms*, Andrews uses fluid images and provides sharp commentary on the prude society which starves and represses the orgasm.

“It is important to be afraid in the land of the anti-orgasm. And we are. After all we don’t want to be caught with our orgasms. Have them seized. Taken away. Better to hide, keep them quiet. It’s very dangerous. We tighten our belt. Take our breath away. And move only in slow motion if we move it all. Look! The whole nation is turning to stone. It’s a religion. Immaculate white bodies are cut from slabs. Worshipped. Devout members of the community see the statues move. Then they have stone orgasms” (Andrews, *Orgasms* 15).

The absence of the line break allow the reader to gain momentum and not be interrupted as the digest each image. It captures the terror of a repressive regime trying to subdue the orgasm. The effort however is futile as those turned into stone still are able to have “stone orgasms.” The poem jumps from perspective to perspective; moving from the concept of the land of the anti-orgasm, to feeling the oppression of it, then drawing back again and viewing the nation from afar, then zooming in to see its members turned to stone, and then into statue’s internal emotions. The jumps are more easily accepted because the mind reads each line sequentially and fluidly as if it were true prose. The reader’s conscious is deceived and tries to create a plot from a psychological picture. Similar to dreaming, they accept the jumps between images and endure the surreal without question. “The Cosmic Orgasm” is similar, but it is the narrator’s voice changes instead of the perspective; leaving the reader with the question “who exactly is speaking?”

“The orgasm was always saying I want you, I’m just back from the moon while your strapless dress slides down with an assign. How do you explain it? In the sudden drought even the evergreens dropped their needles around the charred

remnants of a star. And you were the shadow clinging to her heels. When you woke from a deep sleep, the invisible world revealed its secret sexuality. In the distance our unborn child swam away like a fish in the air” (Andrews, *Orgasms* 45).

Here attention to individual descriptive words is important. Like flashes of light before the eyes, they come in quick succession of the other. The mind tries to make sense of the metaphors though there is no logical connection between the images, such as “in the distance our unborn child swam away like a fish in the air.”

Because of its structure and wit “The Orgasm: An Interview” is an excellent representation of Andrews’ post-modern playfulness in her poetry.

“Why Orgasms?”

--Every now and then an orgasm comes along that captures the hearts and minds of mankind. An extraordinary orgasm can change the course of human history.

How many lives does an orgasm have?

--It depends on the occasion.

If a man has many orgasms, which do you think he likes best?

--The one he’s working on right at the moment.

Do all orgasms tell stories?

--Yes. As an orgasm, I like telling about the sheer luck of being born.

Are orgasms dangerous?

--Absolutely. Have you heard of Wilhelm Reich? He invented orgone boxes to cure impotence. Men went into the boxes and waited. Some never came out again.

Do you consider orgasms to be therapeutic?

--Orgasms can create a mutation in consciousness. They are sleeping giants waiting to wake up.

Then what happens?

--They can become who you are. For a brief moment you can be lifted up on the wings of orgasms. You can become one with your orgasm.

Are orgasms every socially acceptable?

--No. Resistance to orgasms is great in our society. Many men live lives of quiet orgasm starvation. It is a desperate situation.

As far as orgasms go, do you consider yourself an experimental orgasm?

--I am certainly not the orgasm from beyond, the kind who wishes he never came.

Can you explain the significance of orgasms?

--Not exactly. You see, the truth of orgasms is rather slippery and can never be grasped. Orgasms are born free yet everywhere men and women are trying to put them in chains.

Is there such a thing as a bad orgasm?

--Usually these are not real orgasms. These are fakes pretending to be one of us. You have to look pseudo-orgasms in the eye and say, I know orgasms, and you're no orgasm. It's very simple.

Tell me: From an Orgasm's perspective, what are people like?

--People worry too much. They sit back and ponder, wondering whether or not to have an orgasm. Think of all the good orgasms they waste in the meanwhile.

Is there a limit to how many orgasm one should have?

--Ah, you Americans, always afraid of trouble of having too much of a good thing when few have enough. Fear is the mother of safety but death is the mother of beauty” (Andrews, *Orgasms* 52).

By mocking wordplay generally found in interviews with politicians and celebrities, Andrews creates a satiric sense of humor found in prose poems like David Ignatow’s “The Diner.” The prose poem allows Andrews to make the orgasm look serious, romantic and humorous; giving her the freedom to utilize a variety of techniques in order to display the full range of definitions of the orgasm.

The prose poem provides an ideal environment for recreating memory, a personal event some authors attempt to nail down with as many concrete details as possible. Andrews only allows the reader a glance instead of revealing the full story. This is acceptable in prose poetry because instead of portraying memory like a photograph and leaving the reader to interpret it, the poem has movement much like memory is actually perceived. “After the snake bit him”, whose title’s lack of capitalization aptly turns it into the starting point of the story, shows the natural derailment of through when trying to retell a tale.

“Jimmy liked showing off where the fangs went in. You can’t blame a gal when you grab her from behind, he’d say. Like the snake had to be some kind of gal. I just smirked, tossed my ponytail, and walked away. That was the year I wouldn’t muck stalls or toss horseshoes or listen to his talk about what he did with this girl or that. Instead I rode my fat-tired bicycle into town and had my hair permed into a thousand curls. All I ever cared about was how I looked. Like

the night I dressed up in a polyester double knit dress that clung to my skin like bad weather. Fine, Jimmy said. You look real fine. Then he lit up a cigarette and blew smoke in the dark, like it meant nothing to him” (Andrews *Southern Comfort* 46).

Starting with an anecdote Andrews continues to recall other tales of that year, providing context and back story in a manner that resembles common speech. Switching sporadically between background story and personal narrative, the reader is given the perception that they are making the same connections between the thoughts of the narrator as they happen within her mind. This balance of recollection and dialog reflects how memories may be perceived and is more natural than being directly told what to think or feel. “In Grandma’s Bathroom” is another example the smooth transitions of images without the hesitation of a line break.

“Centipedes race across the linoleum and scurried up the stone walls. I stared into her cracked mirror and at the rows of empty perfume bottles, dusting myself with her talcum powder and cologne. Her toilet never stopped running. Grandma would come in and rattle the handle, take the to off the tank, pull the black ball up in the back, and say I wasn’t supposed to be using her facilities anyway. As if her huge, ancient behind made the porcelain seat unfit for my bony butt. One time Grandma sat on the toilet seat and broke it in three pieces. Another time I walked in and saw her, wrinkled and wet rising up and up from the bathtub like a genie from a bottle. There was so much of her, I couldn’t stop staring, wondering how it all fit in one tub, on one set of old bones. She dried herself off with a floral tea towel, dabbing inside all her cases and crevices. Look here,

honey child, she said. Don't you be slipping in here again, hear?" (Andrews, *Southern Comfort* 14).

The mood of the poem is set by the flaws of the setting. Centipedes, cracked bottles and broken toilets create a twisted feeling of nostalgia. The curiosity and interest about this off limits places is developed by the suddenness of her Grandmother's presence after the narrator was alone dusting herself with Talcum powder. Switching between passive and active images, the reader is jostled, and then is presented the frantic sight of the emerging grandmother as she rises from the undersized bathtub. The image of her elder toweling off before her followed by her quick reprimand provides a psychological reality of thrill of being caught. She captures the moment with clarity by balancing the traditionally nostalgic image of her elder with the gritty realities of the moment this memory occurred.

Prose poetry offers a freedom of perspective that allows the author to play both the reflective narrator and the subject of interpretation through fluctuating modes of consciousness. "Adolescence" reflects and critiques the actions of the narrator's younger self.

"I never knew you then, though I remember that spring a squinty-eyed girl kneeling on the gravel driveway in Virginia, fingering a frozen bee. The bee had already passed out of the bee you thought, but it stung anyhow, in one last surge. The sin arching into your hand, then curling up like a child in the fetal position. You screamed, ran inside, the screen door slamming behind you. That year you cried a lot, still pretending you were Helen Keller, bumping into sharp edges of tables and the kitchen counter. The farmhand's son, your first crush, went steady

with Sarah Lee Combs, a waitress at HoJo's who wore miniskirt that showed more than her legs. She liked to cook the turtles he caught in the pond by feeling in the mud with his toes. Afternoons, listening to him say her name, Sarah Lee, again and again, you imagined the moles on her hairless legs, her scent of sweat and vanilla. You forgot your chores and what you were saying mid-sentence. At school you stopped playing jacks with the other girls at recess. One day you sat alone on the stone steps, eating a tangerine, watching two boys bat a tetherball. Juice beaded on your lips. Slowly, carefully, you bit into each section savoring tiny mouthfuls, spitting out the seeds. Fresh blood bled through a Band-Aid on your thumb and leaked a crimson star on a segment of the tangerine. You didn't notice yet the taste of iron mixing with the juice on your tongue" (Southern Comfort 43).

The microscopic images from the past give this poem the feeling that the reader is viewing a flashback from a movie, yet one can simultaneously visualize the passive narrator as she provides small quips toward her former self. Crisp, sensory images stay in the forefront, such as "feeling in the mud with his toes" or "fresh blood bled through a Band-Aid" and the subtle narrator applies critique such as the subject "still pretending [she was] Helen Keller". Prose poetry gives both the subject and the speaker the opportunity to interact freely without it being disorienting. The result is a coexisting duality of perspectives, which is apt to portraying memory as it is complex enough to allow the reader feel it's like their own.

The prose poem over time has displayed its versatility by a range of poets, French, American, old and new. Andrews draws upon colorful memoirs to create a life

uncensored in her collections. Her use of the prose poem shows its post-modern application describing the individual instead of the crowd. Though her techniques aren't necessarily new, the subject and themes she describes would have at one point not been considered poetic by those in the ivory tower. Femininity, sexuality and anecdotes of very personal events might at one point been better left to the boudoir than being openly distributed and accepted by literary scholars. Andrew's abrasive, unapologetic and paradoxically subtle style shows she has not been pigeon holed by the past usage of the prose poem, and is instead making strides in its evolution.

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