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Elliott Coleman
Johns Hopkins University

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Poetry and Prose: *The Prose Poem*

by Elliott Coleman

In the eighteenth century in his book *The New Science*, maintaining the simultaneous origin of language and poetry, the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico remarks that when Prose was invented Philosophy was made possible. In the twentieth century the philosopher, aesthetician, and interpreter of Vico, Benedetto Croce has this to say about poetry and prose:

The distinction between *poetry and prose* cannot be justified, save as that between *art and science*. It was seen in antiquity that such distinction could not be founded on external elements, such as rhyme and meter, or on rhymed or unrhymed form; that it was, on the contrary, altogether internal. Poetry is the language of feeling, prose of the intellect; but since the intellect is also feeling, in its concreteness and reality, all prose has its poetical side.

The relation between intuitive knowledge or expression and intellectual knowledge or concept, between art and science, poetry and prose, cannot be otherwise defined than by saying that it is one of *double degree*. The first degree is the expression, the second the concept: the first can stand without the second, but the second cannot stand without the first. There is poetry without prose, but not prose without poetry.

Theory of Aesthetic, Chap. 3, "Art
And Philosophy," pp. 25-26. Tr. by
Douglas Ainslie

Twenty years ago, maintaining that poetry is primarily a matter of *Images*, Lord Dunsany wrote (*The Atlantic*, May, 1945): "The essential thing about poetry is neither rhyme nor meter." Adding that prose poetry is suited to our breathing, he said, "ECCLESIASTES makes me believe that the boundary between poetry and prose is only an arbitrary line." "ECCLESIASTES is poetry, Pope is prose."

Four years ago the Nobel Prize for literature was awarded the French poet St. John Perse on the occasion of the appearance of his new prose-poem *CHRONIQUE*. Last fall saw the publication of the new poems of Mr. Karl Shapiro which are entirely in prose. All this spring, the matter of the prose-poem was much in mind for still other reasons than have been mentioned, and it seemed very tardy after so many years, and high time, to start to make an exploration by asking four questions with

regard to antiquity: with respect to several of the richest ancient cultures:

- 1) When was prose invented?
- 2) When did it become an important means of expression?
- 3) When did it become an artistic medium, an art-form, an art?
- 4) Did it become equal or supersede poetry?

Professor William F. Albright, the oriental archaeologist, was consulted and it was interesting to learn from him that narrative prose came quite early in Egypt and Sumeria, in both cases no later than the twentieth century B.C., and this was also true of the writing of proverbs which appeared in prose as well as verse. The stories recorded were nearer in length to short stories than to novels. The further question was asked: Did prose come into use with the invention of writing? Professor Albright said that it probably did. When there was no written language, it was necessary for a culture to preserve itself by the mnemonic devices of poetry. A fixed form helped man to remember; poetry was life.

In the case of the Hebrews, Professor William Albright pointed to the works about the lives of Saul, David, Solomon, and Elisha as the oldest artistic use of prose by the Jews. They are from the tenth century B.C. and are contained in the Old Testament: I and II *Samuel*, and I and II *Kings*. Here, in the translation of the American Revision Committee of 1901, is a selection from II *Samuel* (11:2 ff.):

And it came to pass at eventide that David arose from off his bed, and walked around the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon. And David sent and enquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite? And David sent messengers and took her . . . and she sent and told David, and said, I am with child . . . And it came to pass in the morning that David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. And he wrote in the letter saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle and retire ye from him that he may be smitten and die . . . And when the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she made lamentation for her husband. And when the mourning was past, David sent and took her home to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased Jehovah. And Jehovah sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him and said unto him, There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor . . .”

You will perhaps remember the parable of the ewe lamb which follows; then the

anger of the king at the injustice done, and finally the judgment hurled by the prophet in the words: "Thou art the man."

In order to find out when prose was invented in Greece, Professor Garry Wills was consulted and one learned there was evidence of prose in Greece about 650 years before Christ. It was of great interest to be given an enlarged and clarified view of the prose philosophers, prose historians, prose orators of Greece, and striking to learn that, beginning with inscriptions, prose narratives began to appear between the seventh and sixth centuries, B.C. (known only by later references to them), but that the greatest number of Greek novels were written in the first and second centuries, A.D., not good in quality, melodramatic, showing no Christian but only Pagan influences.

Again, the further question was asked: Did the invention of a written language bring prose into being in Greece? Probably yes, was the answer again. It was very likely, and there was the arresting coincidence that the writing down of Homer and the first prose of Greece both occurred in Ionia.

As for Latin, to one who had for some time thought of the first Latin novel as the work of Petronius Arbiter in the reign of Nero, it was interesting to learn that there had never been a time when Italians had not been conscious of a prose tradition, for they had been copiers rather than inventors and had had something to copy.

What it all seemed to amount to was that prose was invented just as fast as it could be, in antiquity, and was not long in becoming important.

We may have been reminded too often of Monsieur Jourdain, the character in the comedy by Moliere (*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*), who found out to his surprise that he had been speaking prose all his life. But Monsieur Jourdain had not been speaking prose all his life. Monsieur Jourdain had been speaking *speech* all his life. For most of us prose is a more exacting composition than speech, though based upon speech. It is true that the word *prose* comes from a Latin word which means *to be straightforward*, and there is a sense in which prose composition is in contrast with the composition of poetry; but there is another sense in which, in its origins, it is not straightforward, any more than speech is always straightforward. Is anything so *indirect* as speech? Is anything so complicatedly *direct* as some poetry? Prose is an art. Some can utter it. Most have to compose it. The opinions of scholars as to when it began to be composed successfully as art — and as to when the novel *began* — in more recent Western literatures — these opinions are extensively stated in easily available reference works such as the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. If it is correct to think that in these later cultures, in the latter Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, the rise in Europe of a bourgeoisie with the invention of printing helped to turn speech into prose, may it not also be true, at least to a considerable extent that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in certain Western nations, including our own, that a rapidly growing and in some places almost universal literacy has aided prose in its supplanting of poetry? Or shall we say in the supplanting of *verse*? How remarkable is the rise of prose, in France, Italy, Britain, Ireland, Spain, Russia, and

other countries, and its transformations down to the present: a present which is an age of prose, and not only an age of prose, but of poetry-in-prose. But let us dwell for just a little on the more general subject of poetry-in-prose, before we come to our real subject: the prose poem.

Perhaps some would agree after several re-reading of *Finnegans Wake*, that this work is a poem, more a poem than anything else, a poem with some non-poetry in it, but altogether a poem and mostly written in prose. Lately it has been interesting to discover what Waldo Frank, just twenty years ago this summer (*The New Republic*, August 20, 1945) wrote in an article entitled "The Novel As Poem." Here is part of what he said:

All good novels (and plays) are poems, in so far as they have rhythm, architectonic, focus, and a 'voice' immanent in their matter yet transcending it; in so far as they reveal the traits of an organism whose whole is quantitatively different from the sum of its parts, as the live body differs from the sum of its chemical constituents. The common shift from verse in the great story-tellers of the past (Homer, Dante, Milton) to the more complex textures of prose (Rabelais, Cervantes, Proust) is partly due to the greater complexities of modern life. This is not to say that the intrinsic mind of Dostoevsky was more involved than Shakespeare's. The greater complexity lies in the ground of the relations between author and public; in the shared realm of tradition, concept and experience where author and public must meet. When this ground was comparatively simple, yet strong enough to support the deep poet's vision he was helped by the traditional verse forms whose unities symbolized the common feeling and knowledge. In this sense Aeschylus and Racine were contemporaries. Thereafter, verse epics and plays continued to be written; but largely by weak and imitative men more in touch with literary custom than with the complexities of life. The great story-teller needed for his poem the more flexible, spacious and contemporary capacities of prose.

It is unfortunate that Waldo Frank then indulges in the diversion of an attack upon the prose-poem; calling it a bastard form, he celebrates those writers he calls the great poets of modern Europe (definitely excluding England), all of whom were prose writers: Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert and Zola in France; Galdos in Spain; Gogol and Tolstoy in Russia. He has mentioned Proust and he has mentioned Shakespeare. As to Marcel Proust, many might agree: that all his books form one great poem on the three themes of death, of art, of life. Perhaps a different diversion may be permitted in the case of Shakespeare. There is an action of Shakespeare's that often seems astonishing and bewildering (until one reflects that it is in part the introduction to an English age of prose). The action takes place in some of his dramas or drama-poems, if one may term them so, and it is the employment of prose as well

as verse: or the *deployment* of prose as well as verse. Who can explain — maybe someone *has* explained it — why in *All's Well That Ends Well*, the Countess speaks in both prose and blank verse, while the King and Helena speak in both blank verse and heroic couplets? Why is it that Hamlet abandons blank verse for prose, when he is feigning madness or advising the players?

In 1842 in a review in which he discussed a book entitled *Centaure* by the then recently deceased French poet Maurice de Guérin, the French critic Sainte-Beuve first used the phrase *poemes-en-prose: prose poems*. The prose poem. The form is reminiscent of paragraphs in the book of *Ecclesiastes* in the Old Testament; the origins are not clear, but soon there was a flow of such writing. The prose poems of Baudelaire were outstanding. (Poe's *Colloquies*, especially "Shadow"?) We know he had been moved by the *Gaspard de la Nuit* of Aloysius Bertrand. Here is the English translation by Stuart Merrill (1890) of *The Buffoon And The Venus* by Charles Baudelaire:

What an admirable afternoon! The vast park swoons under the burning eye of the sun, like youth under the domination of love.

The universal ecstasy of things expresses itself in no sound; the waters themselves seem asleep. Different from human festivals, this is a silent orgy.

It seems as though an ever increasing light makes things sparkle more and more; as though the excited flowers burn with the desire to cope with the azure of the sky by the violence of their colors, and as though the heat, making perfumes visible, causes them to rise toward the sun like vapors.

Yet amid that universal enjoyment I perceived an afflicted being.

At the feet of a colossal Venus, one of those artificial fools, one of those voluntary buffoons whose task it is to make kings laugh when remorse or weariness oppresses them, decked out in a loud and ridiculous costume, capped with horns and bells, crouching against the pedestal, lifts his eyes, filled with tears, towards the immortal goddess.

And his eyes say: 'I am the last and the most solitary of mortals, weaned from love and friendship, and thus inferior to the most imperfect of animals. Yet I am made, I too, to understand and feel immortal Beauty! Ah! Goddess, have pity on my sorrow and my madness!'

But the implacable Venus gazes afar upon I know not what with her eyes of marble.

Once more, just the beginning and the end of *Anywhere out of the World*, the beginning of which reminds one a little of T. S. Eliot:

This life is a hospital where every patient is possessed with the desire to change his bed. This one would prefer to suffer before the stove, and that other thinks that he would recover by the window.

It always seems to me that I would be better where I am not, and that question of removal is one that I discuss incessantly with my soul.

Tell me, my soul, my poor chilled soul, what wouldst thou think of dwelling in Lisbon. It must be warm there, and thou wouldst grow as lusty as a lizard. The city is on the sea shore; they say that it is built of marble, and that the inhabitants have such a dislike for anything green that they uproot all the trees. There is a landscape after thy taste, a landscape composed of light and minerals, and water to reflect them . . .

only to conclude, after a fantasy over the North Pole:

At last my soul bursts forth, and wisely cries to me: 'Anywhere! Anywhere! as long as it be out of the world!'

It is ironic that T. S. Eliot, in a never-republished article called "The Borderline Of Prose," printed in *The New Statesman* on May 19, 1917, in a sarcastic attack on Stuart Merrill's 1890 translations of twenty-three French prose-poets (*Pastels in Prose*), fails to mention the name of Charles Baudelaire, who is represented by one of the longer sections consisting of eight prose poems. Among others that Eliot neglected or forgot to mention are: Theodore de Banville, Alphonse Daudet, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Maurice de Guérin. Acknowledging that this unsatisfactory book introduced the prose-poem to the English reader, and apropos of the appearance of some prose-poems by Richard Aldington, T. S. Eliot remarks:

. . . in our times the cycles of change recur very quickly: I have remarked recently the recrudescence [the choice of the word *recrudescence* is significant] of the poem in prose — not only in France, but in England; not only in England, but in America; perhaps not only in America, England, and France, for the tide of civilization may now have carried it in the wake of Strindberg and Ibsen to the shores of Japan. It is noticeable that poetry which looks like prose, and prose which sounds like poetry, are assured of a certain degree of odium and success. Why should this be so? I know that the difference between poetry and prose is a topic for school debating societies, but I am not aware that the debating societies have arrived at a solution. Do the present signs show that poetry and prose form a medium of infinite gradations, or is it that we

are searching for new ways of expression? 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; or, in other words, that there is prose rhythm and verse rhythm. And any other essential difference is still to seek.

Before saying that, he had said this:

. . . time has left us many things, but among those it has taken away we may hope to count A REBOURS and the DIVAGATIONS, and the writings of miscellaneous prose poets. They may eventually find refuge in that depository of indiscretions — the North Room of the British Museum — but to the general public they are no great loss . . .

Thirteen years later, T.S. Eliot published his translation, the first English translation, of the *Anabasis* of the French diplomat and foreign officer who was quietly, brilliantly, and craftily becoming a famous poet: St. John Perse (Alexis Léger Léger). This long poem was written in French prose. Eliot translated it into English prose. Perhaps that is one reason he never republished “The Borderline of Prose.” (Léger, incidentally, once confided that he thought it a wretched translation — and that, furthermore, Eliot had led a whole generation of poets astray — but enough of that). Now, after writing many marvelous long poems in prose, Léger is still living and writing in Washington (and France) and you may recall that in 1961 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature on the occasion of the appearance of still another of his prose-poems: *Chronique*. His only public statement on poetry since his exile in America was his response in Stockholm to the Nobel award, and it is worth reading.

But to be fair to T. S. Eliot (who was always fair to Perse), and to finish with “The Borderline of Prose,” he does also say in the essay that the prose poetry of the Nineties was largely based, to quote him, “upon the work of a man much greater than any poet then living — and that is Arthur Rimbaud.” Eliot calls Rimbaud’s *Illuminations (Colored Plates)* “Amazingly convincing” and says their prose is good French prose — implying there is nothing “poetic” about it. To quote him for the last time:

The ILLUMINATIONS attain their effect by an instant and simple impression, a unity all the more convincing because of the apparent incongruity of images. They find their proper expression in prose *because they seem to have come to their author already clothed in that form*; just as Dante’s account of the Aristotelian soul is right in verse, because it seems to have come to the author in that form; and Dante

is not 'prosaic,' nor would Rimbaud be more 'poetic' if he had put his visions into verse.

This is a new criterion, judging something by whether it seems to have come to the author "in that form." But the point that needs greater emphasis here is that Rimbaud's *Illuminations* are visions, and the question that nobody seems to have asked is precisely *why* these visions, these visions like dreams in color, came clothed in the form of prose. And why the *Connaissance de l'Est* of Paul Claudel (the other person Eliot praised in his suppressed article) came clothed in prose. And precisely why, also, all the work of St. John Perse, after his early West Indian verse, has been written in prose. (Claudel is a link between Rimbaud and Perse). The first *why* is the most important *why*. Why prose for Rimbaud after all the verse he wrote earlier? First, we know that although he called Baudelaire a god, Rimbaud also later referred to the work of Baudelaire as being insufficient in invention, as lacking the boldest originality. So that although Baudelaire had helped to alert Rimbaud to the further possibilities of the poem-in-prose, there was no adulation of the copycat, and besides, Rimbaud's prose poetry is different in kind as well as in degree. It may be worthwhile to venture one opinion, remembering that for a complex of reasons, the prose poem was already *there*. May it not be that Rimbaud's deliberate *dérèglement*, his dis-ordering of the senses for the sake of poetry, whatever else it may have meant, meant this: that his mind was broken open: that is to say, all that was in him, already known but unrecognized, all that was vibrating within, just beyond the verge, the pale of the pre-conscious came forth, apparition upon apparition, and was instantaneously clothed in the opposite garb, the opposite colors to his classical training, now deeply rejected within him. Partly the revolt was conscious; he wanted to be the opposite of everything represented by Alfred de Musset. But when he was led to make himself vulnerable to the powerful forces in his preconsciousness, he found a total self that was a universal self. The language and the poet had reached the same point at the same time, and the poetry and the poet were set free in the glow of the nakedness of prose: a natural prose that became supernatural. The end was reached before youth was ended. Nothing yet had been more straightforward than this writing; at one and the same time it was both complex and hard rationally to understand, and yet it could be apprehended immediately and felt profoundly.

Another remarkable versifier who also became a prose poet left a last poem which is perhaps neither verse nor prose and perhaps should be allowed to startle and to stimulate some young American poets today: That is *Un Coup de Dés* by Stéphane Mallarmé: A THROW OF THE DICE WILL NEVER ABOLISH CHANCE. But Mallarmé wrote quite early a difficult poem in absolutely regular rhymed stanzas which he entitles *Prose Pour des Esseintes*. Des Esseintes is a character in the novel by Huysmans entitled *A Rebours* (AGAINST THE GRAIN). Why did Mallarmé call this fourteen stanza poem a Prose? Part of the answer is given by the Church. The

Oxford dictionary defines the ecclesiastical meaning of *prose* as follows:

A piece of rhythmical prose or rimed accentual verse, sung or said between the Epistle and Gospel at certain masses; also called a sequence.

Whether rhymed verse or rhythmical prose, these brief straightforward discourses were graceful forms of the art of transition, and they were and are still all called *proses*. Many of the new books about poetry today do not take prose into account; they still concern themselves completely with the old verse prosody. (The derivation of *prosody* is different from that of *prose*, though they look and sound alike; *prosody* comes to us through Latin from two Greek words (pros-ōdē, meaning *with regard to the song or ode*.) The prosody and the verse keep on echoing one another today, until occasionally one feels like changing terms by edict: that is, instead of invariably saying *poems* and *poems in prose* make it the rule to say, at least part of the time, *poems* and *poems in verse*.

It has been interesting to find a few sentences from an article written by John Crowe Ransom in 1952 (*The New Republic*, October 6):

Prose is an old art, which came to its most magnificent flower in the seventeenth century with such writers as Browne, Milton, Taylor, and those writers who gave us such things as ISAIAH 60 and I CORINTHIANS 13 in the Authorized Version.

Prose art is the invention of poets who have come to the point, not of surrendering the rhythmic interest of language, but of wanting to register it in a less primeval or elementary manner.

I think we may go a little further. It may be that the prose rhythm develops first in the poetry itself . . .

Dryden is regarded as the first important man of letters to succeed, though a poet, in writing prose without rhythm. Swift and Defoe followed him in time, though their achievement was independent of his; probably it was less difficult for they were not poets in the first place. But in spite of these distinguished examples, rhymed prose did not fail to come back, and it is with us today.

A good conclusion to a history of English prose rhythm written today would be by stopping with a placement for two important figures: James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway. Joyce was a complete man of letters and knew all about the rhythms of both poetry and prose. In *ULYSSES*, he shows amazing skills for prose styles, exhibiting a vast number of kinds, and never allowing them to be corrupted by lapses into meter. But in *FINNEGANS WAKE* he is in the world of fantasy, playing with

the language, now for comic and now for lyric effects, with his guards completely down; he has many folk-lines imbedded in the prose, and differs from Milton who had the rhythmical prose imbedded in the lines. On the other hand, Ernest Hemingway would scarcely be, nor would he covet being, a man of letters; one presumes that he has never tolerated the kind of education which would have made the meters resound in his consciousness. And we approve of that. We say to ourselves that this bare un-rhythmed prose of his is the most *transparent* medium yet invented for the art of fiction.

In 1920, William Carlos Williams published a sequence of prose poems entitled *Kora in Hell, Improvisations*. In introducing a second printing in 1957, Dr. Williams said:

But what was such a form to be called? I was familiar with the typically French prose poem, its pace was not the same as my own composition. What I had permitted myself could not by any stretch of the imagination be called verse. Nothing to do but put it down as it stood, trusting to the generous *spirit of the age* to find a place for it.

Here are two selections from it:

V I Beautiful white corpse of night actually! So the north-west winds of death are mountain sweet after all! All the troubled stars are put to bed now: three bullets from wife's hand none kindlier: in the crown, in the nape and one lower: three starlike holes among a million pocky pores and the moon of your mouth: Venus, Jupiter, Mars, and all stars melted forthwith into this one good white light over the inquest table — the traditional moth beating its wings against it — except there are two here. But sweetest are the caresses of the county physician, a little clumsy perhaps — mais! — and the Prosecuting Attorney, Peter Valuzzi and the others, waving green arms of maples to the tinkling of the earliest rag-picker's bells. Otherwise — kindly stupid hands, kindly coarse voices, infinitely soothing, infinitely detached, infinitely beside the question, restfully babbling of how, where, why and night is done and the green edge of yesterday has said all it could . . .

XXII I This is a slight stiff dance to a waking baby whose arms have been lying curled back above his head upon the pillow, making a flower — the eyes closed. Dead to the world! Waking is a little hand brushing away dreams. Eyes open. Here's a new world.

There is nothing the sky-serpent will not eat. Sometimes it stoops

to gnaw Fujiyama, sometimes to slip its long and softly clasping tongue about the body of a sleeping child who smiles thinking its mother is lifting it.

If this work is closer to Rimbaud than to anyone else, the following prose selection by an earlier American poet reminds us more of Claudel, though it pre-dates Claudel:

THE SPANISH PEAKS — EVENING ON

THE PLAINS (1879)

Between Pueblo and Bent's fort, southward, in a clear afternoon sun-spell I catch exceptionally good glimpses of the Spanish peaks. We are in southeastern Colorado — pass immense herds of cattle as our first-class locomotive rushes us along — two or three times crossing the Arkansas, which we follow many miles, and of which river I get fine views, sometimes for quite a distance, its stony, upright, not very high, palisade banks, and then its muddy flats. We pass Fort Lyon — lots of adobe houses — limitless pasturage, appropriately fleck'd with those herds of cattle — in due time the declining sun in the west — a sky of limpid pearl all over — and so evening on the great plains. A calm, pensive, boundless landscape — the perpendicular rocks of the north Arkansas, hued in twilight — a thin line of violet on the southwestern horizon — the palpable coolness and slight aroma — a belated cowboy with some unruly member of his herd — an emigrant wagon toiling yet a little further, the horses slow and tired — two men, apparently father and son, jogging along on foot — and around all the indescribable *chiaroscuro* and sentiment, (profounder than anything at sea) athwart these endless wilds.

That is from the *Specimen Days* of Walt Whitman.

Verlaine, Lautréamont, Bertrand, Turgenev, Rilke, Max Jacob: But the main line today seems to be Rimbaud, Claudel, Perse. Rimbaud in the *Illuminations* and *A Season in Hell*; Claudel in *The East I Know*; Perse in everything after his early West Indian verses: *Anabasis*, *Exile*, *Winds*, *Seamarks*, and *Chronique*. With a quick comparison of the prose poetry of these three, the sampling is finished.

Here, from the *Illuminations* of Rimbaud, in the translations of Henri Peyre, are "Dawn" and "Mystique:"

DAWN

I have embraced the summer dawn.

Nothing was stirring as yet on the fronts of the palaces. The water was dead. The camps of shadows did not leave the road in the woods. I walked, awakening the live and warm breaths; and the precious stones

watched, and wings silently rose up.

The first venture was, on the path already filled with cool, pale light, a flower which told me its name.

I laughed at the blond waterfall that ran dishevelled its hair through the pines: at its silver crest I recognized the goddess.

Then I took off her veils one by one . . .

Then I took off her veils one by one. In the path, shaking my arms. Across the plain, where I denounced her to the cock. In the big city, she fled among the bell-towers and the domes; and running like a beggar along the marble quays, I pursued her.

At the top of the road, near a laurel grove, I enfolded her in her gathered-up veils, and I felt her vast body a little. Dawn and the child fell at the edge of the wood.

Upon awakening, it was noon.

MYSTIQUE

On the slope of the hillock, angels whirl their woolen robes, in the grasses of steel and emerald.

Meadows of flame leap up to the top of the mound. On the left, the earth mold of the ridge is trampled upon by all murders and all battles, and all the disastrous noises race along their own curve. Behind the crest on the right, the line of Orient, of progress.

And, while the strip at the top of the picture is made of the whirling and leaping murmur of conch shells from the seas and of human nights,

The flowery softness of the stars, of the sky and of all else comes down opposite the bank, like a basket — close to our faces, and makes the abyss flowering and blue below.

Paul Claudel wrote in 1913:

The reading of the *ILLUMINATIONS*, and then several months afterward, *A SEASON IN HELL*, was an experience of the utmost importance. Those lines gave me the living and almost the physical impression of the supernatural.

In a letter to Paterne Berrichon, he wrote:

It is to Rimbaud that I humanly owe my return to the faith.

(Quoted by Wallace Fowlie in his *Rimbaud's Illuminations*, p. 17)

In *Connaissance de l'Est*, one of the series of prose poems by Claudel, the scene is China (tr. Henri Peyre):

Sweeping the country and this leafy valley, your hand, reaching the crimson and tan-colored earth that your eyes discover yonder, pauses with them on that rich brocade. All is mute and muffled; no wounding green, nothing young and nothing new clashes with the structure and with the song of those full, deep tones. A dark cloud occupies the whole sky which, filling the irregular notches of the mountain with vapor, seems as if mortised to the horizon. With the palm of your hand, caress these broad ornaments, brocaded by the tufts of black pines on the hyacinth of the plains, with your fingers verify these details, sunk in the weft and the mist of this wintry day, a row of trees, a village. The hour truly has stopped; like an empty theater which melancholy fills, the enclosed landscape seems to be listening for a voice so frail that I could not hear it.

These December afternoons are sweet.

Nothing in them speaks as yet of the tormenting future. And the past is not so incompletely dead as to allow anything to survive it. From so much grass and so great a harvest, nothing remains but scattered straw and wilted tufts; a cold winter mortifies the ploughed earth. All is finished. Between one year and the next, here is the pause and the suspense. Thought, freed from its labor, gathers itself into a taciturn pleasure, and, contemplating new undertakings, enjoys, as does the earth, its sabbath.

Both Paul Claudel and Alexis Léger Léger, who writes under the name St. John Perse, were at one time appointed by their government to China. For Claudel the orient was a station on his long diplomatic career as ambassador to several countries. For Perse, the orient was a prelude to his long assignment as Secretary of the French Foreign Office. His poetry is filled with oriental images. The free-thinking Perse has never admitted the debt to the Catholic Claudel which more than one poet has thought that he recognized. The reserved St. John Perse, who never writes a book of criticism, not even about himself, who never gives a lecture, who never reads in public a line of his poetry, nevertheless, has been known on two occasions, at least, to talk freely and deeply in private. He has said that he writes his poetry to extend his own life, to make it wider and richer. His poetry is himself, and an exploration in the recognition and the extension of himself. That extension of self has the universe for its only limit. What finally is written down and published in prose poems is for this author, although he works very hard upon it, only a reflection of the experience of poetry, not the experience of poetry itself. The experience of poetry

itself comes to him as visions he has of life and pre-visions of art, in the first stages of the work.

Here, as we conclude, are three brief paragraphs from the poem *Chronique*, which was made the occasion for the bestowal of the Nobel Prize upon St. John Perse (1960) in the translation of Robert Fitzgerald. The poem was praised by the Nobel Committee as “a prophetic appeal to Europe to consider the fatal moment, the turning point in the course of historical events.”

O you who led us to all this quick of the soul, fortune wandering
on the waters, will you tell us one evening on earth what hand arrays
us in this burning tunic of fable, and from what abysmal depth, for our
good, for our ill, came all that welling of reddening dawn, and that
divine part in us that was part of our darkness?

For many times were we born, in the endless reach of day. And
what is that repast, offered on every table, that we found so suspect in
the absence of the Host? We pass, and, engendered of no one, do we
really know toward what species we are advancing? What do we know
of man, our spectre, under his woolen cape and his stranger's broad
hat?

Thus one sees, at evening, in cattle-towns where countrymen buy
their seed — all the fountains deserted and on every square dry mud
tracked by cloven hooves — those strangers without names or faces,
their tall headgear pulled down, stopping under the eaves to accost the
big country girls who lean against door jambs, smelling of dusk and
night like a jar of wine in the shade.

The poem ends:

Listen, O night, in the deserted courtyards and under the solitary
arches, amid the holy ruins, and the crumbling of old termite hills, hear
the great sovereign footfalls of the soul without a lair,

Like a wild beast prowling a pavement of bronze.

*

Great age, behold us. Take the measure of man's heart.

It would be foolish because it would be wrong to insist that every poet should become a prose-poet, or even a part-time prose poet. Without the measure and the sharpness of good verse — not to mention its marvelous silences — we could not appreciate good prose. But without prose, we can hardly today appreciate the contracted two-line poem “Mattina,” of the Italian poet, Giuseppe Ungaretti:

M'illumino
d'immenso

or as Mr. John Frederick Nims has translated it:

I flood myself with light
of the immense

We come back to what Benedetto Croce said at the beginning. A distinction between poetry and prose cannot be founded on external elements such as rhythm and meter, or rhymed or unrhymed form. The distinction must be internal. — If the distinction must be made.

FOOTNOTE

A blindness was lifted at Marianist College, and I saw that much of the *New Testament* is poetry in prose: e.g. many passages in the *Synoptic Gospels* (especially the recorded sayings of Jesus Christ), all of *St. John's Gospel*, much of *St. Paul*, and all of the *Apocalypse*.