

Undulations

The Alchemist's Mind: a book of narrative prose by poets

Edited by David Miller (Reality Street 2012)



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“In prose we speak freely,” the poet Fernando Pessoa wrote in his *Book of Disquiet*, “We can incorporate musical rhythms, and still think. We can incorporate poetic rhythms, and yet remain outside them. An occasional poetic rhythm won’t disturb prose, but an occasional prose rhythm makes poetry fall down.” Baudelaire, too, dreamed of “a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience.” Speaking of *Paris Spleen*, he argued that the great advantage of poetic prose is, “We can cut wherever we please, I my dreaming, you your manuscript, the reader his reading; for I do not keep the reader’s restive mind hanging in suspense on the threads of an interminable and superfluous plot.”

David Miller’s smart little collection of 28 pieces (roughly half writers from the U.K. and half from North America) shows poets taking full advantage of poetic freedom to think lyrically and incorporate rhymes and rhythm. It also includes poets who write with a strong sense of character and narrative drive. Miller describes the collection (which does not attempt to be definitive) as including narrative (as opposed to anti-narrative or non-narrative) work published or written after 1970 by “poets who have a serious

commitment to narrative prose, rather than writing the odd piece.” He avoided including well known writers “whose work is easily available,” and he emphasized “non-conventional, in many cases innovative or experimental, writing.” His quirky introduction (14 pages plus 15 pages of essay-style footnotes) provides some useful ways to understand and compare the selections.

The book’s title comes from the following statement in Fanny Howe’s “Even This Confined Landscape”: “Structures do variations on the same law, then comes the alchemist’s mind and all is changed.” Who is the alchemist? Howe’s piece invokes notions of paradise and mentions “G-d.” But surely the alchemists (or gods?) involved here are the writers and readers of these texts within whom verbal structures are at play, ringing their variations against the rhythms and rhymes of the mind – where each reader fabricates gold. Meaning is thus open-ended, subject to a myriad further variations, contrasts, imports.

In some of the selections, seeing the formal variations is crucial to making sense of the piece. For example Ian Robinson’s “Delayed Frames” interleaves among other things a travel narrative, a sexual encounter and the story of evolution, alternating threads from each in tight, short, identically-sized blocks of text so that these narrative contexts or frames get their full import only after a delay from intervening text:

. . . . For an instant we made out his red upright penis. It was love at first sight. Couples with linked arms walked past. The edge of the island stretched away in the mist. Then it disappeared into her mouth. The noise was deafening. . . .

Using headings and short paragraphs, Rosmarie Waldrop’s “A Form of Memory,” from her ‘novel’ *A Form/ Of Taking/ It All*, interleaves stories of the explorer von Humboldt, deportment training for a religious procession of boys and girls, destruction of the Aztecs by Europeans, the preparation of a native virgin for a colonial explorer, campaigns by Napoleon, and the science of volcanoes, and thus vividly portrays the violence and horror built into western culture.

Another piece containing marvelous formal play is Lyn Hejinian’s “Lola” which presents itself both as a play, with dramatis personae:

The dog on its leash knows the secret of freedom.

*This is promising, says Lola.
Fanfare and ridiculous light.
Chapter One.*

and as a ‘novel,’ with chapter headings like “Chapter on the Side of One, Two, Three,” “What to See in Chapter Three,” “Chapter for Fun” and “Chapter Around.” This is a text that revels in rhythm and rhyme: “The apple in fall comes to rest near a man with his fortune rolled up in a ball that he caught on a dare as it bounded off a car, the door slightly ajar, a strange smell in the air.” Full of metafictional fun, the piece comments that:

A novelist is no more a scientist than a snake charmer is a herpetologist or a tightrope walker is an engineer or a cook is a chemist or a voting booth is a sanctuary or a confession is an autobiography or the folding of the nomad’s hammock is a surrender of territory.

Another innovator, Lee Harwood, offers us short paragraphs seemingly unrelated to each other, but followed by quiz questions suggesting ways to put them together.

On the other hand, this collection includes many pieces shaped by a strong narrative drive in a distinctive voice. For example Bernadette Mayer’s “Farmers Exchange”: “I went in for some soil. The guy looked at me, I had the baby too, and he said after a long while, ‘pottin serl?’ They had nice petunias out front. I said yes pottin soil. I need alot of it.” Or Guy Birchard’s “Vicar of Distance”:

We left Osoyoos in his Olds 88, Grandad, Firecracker Alice and me, the three of us up front, the back seat out, full of boxes of apples. November.

....

When we got to their Shack up the Missouri Coteau a day or two later Grandad ragged on me some about the ginger way I drove over glare-ice at the summit of Kicking Horse Pass. It was the night of November Cabaret in the Community Hall but I didn’t go. I sat in a rocker all evening till long past dark staring at the wall taking stock of my whole life.

The pieces from bp Nichol's *Selected Organs: Parts of an Autobiography* ("The Mouth," "The Tonsils," "The Lungs: a Draft") made me want to read the whole book. Here's a snippet:

You were never supposed to talk when it was full. It was better to keep it shut if you had nothing to say. You were never supposed to shoot it off. It was better to be seen than heard. It got washed out with soap if you talked dirty. You were never supposed to mouth-off, give them any of your lip, turn up your nose at them, give them a dirty look, an evil eye or a baleful stare. So your mouth just sat there, in the middle of your still face, one more set of muscles trying not to give too much away. 'Hey! SMILE! what's the matter with you anyway?'

Likewise Robert Lax in his insistent self questioning "21 Pages" and Brian Marley in "A Perigee Selection" offer us compelling monologues. Marley's zany, inventive wit is hilarious:

There is, according to grandfather, a poultice guaranteed to satisfy every need. The poultice, he says, isn't just a folk remedy made redundant by modern pharmaceuticals – new, improved poultices are being invented every day. If applied correctly, one of the most recent poultices, the 'ATM', can withdraw cash from even the most recalcitrant hole-in-the-wall machine, whether you're the proud holder of a bank account or not. The 'nuclear' poultice absorbs caesium 137 and shortens its thirty year half-life to less than a week. There's a poultice that, when applied liberally, removes God from the equation. . . .

Some of the most delightful pieces are ones that retell a well-known myth or tale. These include Bernadette Mayer's translation of the conclusion of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* into 20th century colloquial English, John Levy's "Goldilocks and the Five Bears," Vahni Capildeo's "The Seven Dwarfs and Snow White" and Johan de Wit's "A Dream + Another Dream + . . ." – this last being a story of God from childhood with mother in his garden to old age in a garden turned against him.

Space does not permit me to discuss all the remarkable pieces in this collection, which I think does a good job of intriguing readers to search out more work by some lesser known writers. If I were teaching a course in prose poetry, I would certainly find the range of techniques displayed here an engaging and inspiring guide for students. It's also a lot of fun to read.