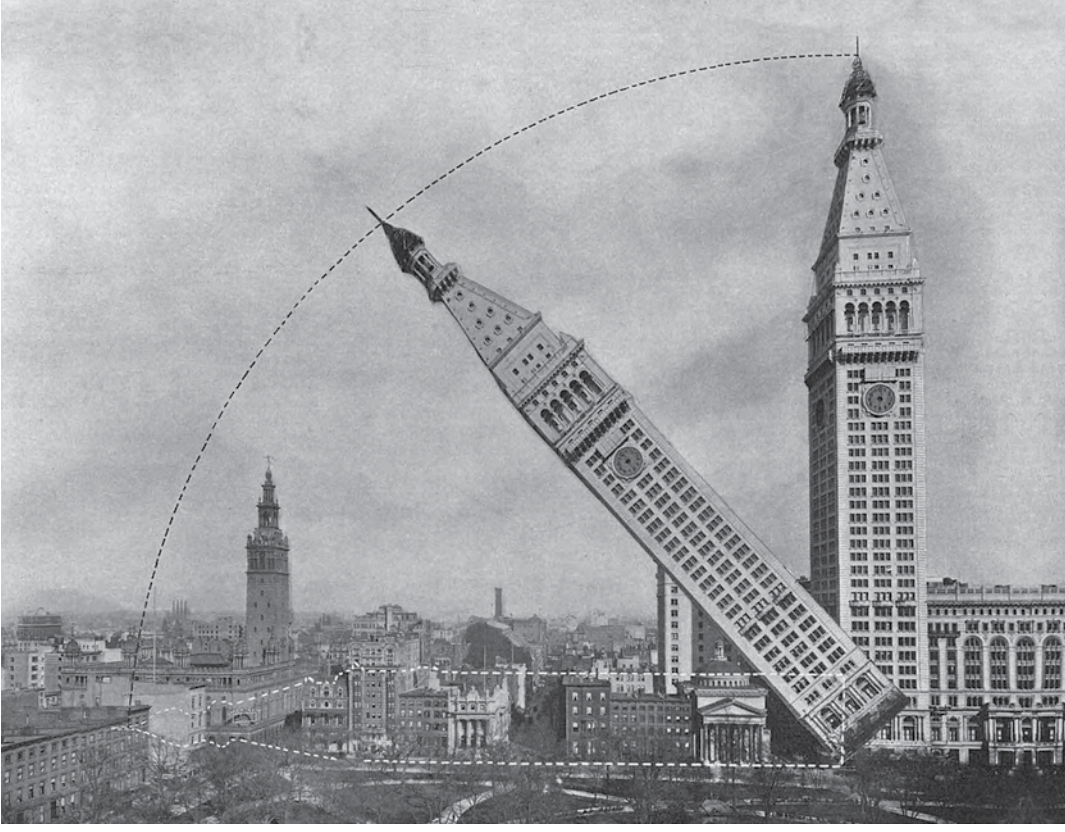

PROSE POETRY AND THE CITY

DONNA STONECIPHER

PROSE POETRY AND THE CITY

Illuminations: A Series on American Poetics

Series Editor, Jon Thompson

Illuminations focuses on the poetics and poetic practices of the contemporary moment in the USA. The series is particularly keen to promote a set of reflective works that include, but go beyond, traditional academic prose, so we take Walter Benjamin's rich, poetic essays published under the title of *Illuminations* as an example of the kind of approach we most value. Collectively, the titles published in this series aim to engage various audiences in a dialogue that will reimagine the field of contemporary American poetics. For more about the series, please visit its website at parlorpress.com/illuminations.

Books in the Series

Prose Poetry and the City by Donna Stonecipher (2017)

PROSE POETRY AND THE CITY

Donna Stonecipher

Parlor Press
Anderson, South Carolina
www.parlorpress.com

Parlor Press LLC, Anderson, South Carolina, USA

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.
S A N: 2 5 4 - 8 8 7 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stonecipher, Donna, 1969- author.
Title: Prose poetry and the city / Donna Stonecipher.
Description: Anderson, South Carolina : Parlor Press, 2018. | Series: Illuminations: a series on American poetics | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018000832 (print) | LCCN 2018003486 (ebook) | ISBN 9781643172651 (pdf) | ISBN 9781602359666 (epub) | ISBN 9781602359994 (pbk. alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Prose poems, American--History and criticism. | Prose poems, French--History and criticism. | Baudelaire, Charles, 1821-1867. Spleen de Paris. | Literary form. | Cities in literature.
Classification: LCC PS309.P67 (ebook) | LCC PS309.P67 S76 2018 (print) | DDC 811/.0309--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018000832

1 2 3 4 5

Illuminations
Series Editor: Jon Thompson

Cover image: "If the Metropolitan Tower were to fall, how far would it extend?" *Scientific American,* 26 June 1909. © 1909 by Munn and Co.
The untitled poem "[Life inside grid object . . .]" by Dawn Lundy Martin, from *Life in a Box Is a Pretty Life*, is reprinted with the kind permission of Nightboat Books.
The poem "Mayor of Hell" by Elizabeth Willis, from *Turneresque*, is reprinted with the kind permission of Burning Deck.
Interior design: David Blakesley
Cover design: Veronika Reichl

Parlor Press, LLC is an independent publisher of scholarly and trade titles in print and multimedia formats. This book is available in paper, cloth and eBook formats from Parlor Press on the World Wide Web at http://www.parlorpress.com or through online and brick-and-mortar bookstores. For submission information or to find out about Parlor Press publications, write to Parlor Press, 3015 Brackenberry Drive, Anderson, South Carolina, 29621, or email editor@parlorpress.com.

Contents

PROSE POETRY AND THE CITY

1. Preliminaries

When Charles Baudelaire wrote the first theoretical text ever written about prose poetry, it took the form of a dedication to the editor of the newspaper that would publish his prose poems, Arsène Houssaye. In it, he wrote, "Which one of us, in his moments of ambition, has not dreamed of the miracle 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, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience?" Then he connected this dream to cities: "It was, above all, out of my explorations of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations, that this haunting ideal was born" (ix-x).[1]

This Ur-text for prose poetry is almost always printed in French and English editions of *Le Spleen de Paris* (also known as *Petit poëmes en prose*—little poems in prose),[2] even though Baudelaire did not necessarily intend for it to be there—the book was published posthumously in 1869. The letter, so poetic it is almost a prose poem itself, functions as a useful theoretical pendant to the form Baudelaire was experimenting with. But what exactly did Baudelaire mean by the curious statement about cities? It is all the more curious since a "huge city"—Paris—figures heavily in the formal poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Which is to say that, for a time at least, rhymed and metered verse must have

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Baudelaire and Rimbaud are by Louise Varèse.

2. Baudelaire alternated these titles in his letters and manuscripts.

seemed an adequate formal vehicle in which to express what it was like to explore huge cities.

In fact, over the century and a half since Baudelaire's letter was published,[3] the notion that the prose poem has a special relationship to the urban has become something of a chestnut, such that, for example, in her 2004 *Boxing Inside the Box*, a study of the prose poem and women writers, Holly Iglesias could state as a matter of fact:

> In the French context, a tradition of stringent syllabic versification, neoclassical formality and Romantic reverie could no longer match the social realities of an increasingly urban and industrial European landscape. Charles Baudelaire found a solution to this dilemma by pursuing what he described in the preface to *Petits Poèmes en prose* as "a poetic prose." (12)

And American poet Cole Swensen, also in 2004, in a brief essay called "Poetry City," wrote: "Prose poetry was the most radical new poetic form [in Modernism], and the one most tied to the urban." Although a number of scholars have dissected Baudelaire's dedication, and have even cast doubt on its sincerity, I wish to take him at his word and ask why, after having written *Les Fleurs du Mal*, his experience exploring "huge cities" led him to believe that his customary elaborately rhymed and metered verse would not be adequate to the "innumerable interrelations" that cities represent. More fundamentally, the question I would like to ask is: What, if anything, do the city and the prose poem have to do with each other?

In this essay, I consider the idea of prose poetry as ontologically urban, as uniquely expressive of urban experience, as claimed initially by Baudelaire, and as examined by a number of contemporary critics who have written on the prose poem, several writers of prose poetry, urban theorists, linguists, architectural theorists, and writers on the sublime. The

3. It was printed in *La Presse* introducing a set of twenty prose poems on August 26, 1862 (Mackenzie introduction to Baudelaire 2008, xiii).

appellation "prose poem" itself, as many have pointed out, is a contradiction in terms and foregrounds a transgression of form. Form is my preoccupation here: the use of prose "form" to contain poetic "content" (if we temporarily subscribe to the notion of a separation of form and content that has been systematically destroyed for a century or more by various writers, though never quite definitively).

Though the question had long turned idly in my mind, I first started to think I might have the beginnings of an answer about the relationship between prose poems and the city as I read the French philosopher Michel de Certeau's essay "Walking in the City" in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. The central premise of De Certeau's book, that supposedly passive consumers turn into active producers through the practice of "tactics" wielded as part of the survival strategies that we all engage in as part of everyday life, manifests itself in urban environments in the ways in which city-dwellers use the givens of the city idiosyncratically to construct unique paradigms of use. As the essay begins, the author is standing atop the World Trade Center looking out at New York City; he perceives that there are two New York Cities, the one he sees from above—an abstract, conceptual city—and the one experienced by the people below, "in" it—a lived city, thus laying out a rhetoric of vertical and horizontal positions. It struck me at the time that many of De Certeau's observations about the relationship between the subject and the objective city that the subject is walking through seemed to apply uncannily to prose poetry, in the sense of a lyric subjectivity moving through prose.

This essay is a record of my investigation into this question. It is as much of a flâneur as Baudelaire's figure moving down the Parisian boulevards, wandering, stopping to examine a painting in a gallery window or to sip a coffee in an outdoor café; it constructs an apparatus of Baudelairean *correspondences* inquiring into how the built environment of the poem relates to the built environments most of humanity now calls home. In the essay, I limit myself largely to American and French poetics, not only because the cross-pollination between these two countries' poetries has been profoundly influencing both since

at least Baudelaire's affinity for Poe in the mid-nineteenth century, but also because in the only other countries whose poetical histories I am well acquainted with, the UK and Germany, the prose poem has never really caught on (and in some circles is still automatically classified strictly as prose—"prose miniatures," in Germany). It is also an investigation into the historical trajectory of the prose poem; over the century and a half since Baudelaire's *Petits poëmes en prose* was published, prose poetry branched into two main types. On the one hand, there's the Baudelairean: poems that make heavy use of narrative structures and that bear more than a passing resemblance to short-short stories or flash fiction, such as those of Russell Edson; on the other there's the Rimbaudian: surrealistic or dreamlike collections of sentences full of unlikely, or unexplained, juxtapositions, such as in the prose poems of Rosmarie Waldrop.

The pinnacle of my wanderings found me wondering if the reason why Walt Whitman "invented" free verse in New York City and Charles Baudelaire "invented" the prose poem in Paris, both around the middle of the nineteenth century, and both in urban contexts, could be in some way related to the respective architectural fabrics of the two cities—New York City's vertical skyscrapers versus Paris's long horizontal Haussmannian façades. While Whitman was writing *Leaves of Grass*, inventions in steel manufacturing and elevator safety were contributing to the erection of the first seven-story buildings in New York, which constituted the infancy of the skyscraper (buildings Whitman extolled in his prose writings); while Baudelaire was at work on *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baron Haussmann was reshaping Paris with long, uniform blocks, in the process destroying the even more horizontal "old Paris." Both Whitman and Baudelaire met the challenges of burgeoning modernity with new modes of writing, but it was Baudelaire's enigmatic statement about huge cities I found irresistible to track.

At the end of my exploration, I arrived not at definitive conclusions about the nature of the prose poem (and by extension, free verse), but at a labyrinth I didn't expect to find (and might never make my way out of). Perhaps one could say I

ended up at the top of my own skyscraper, looking out at an intricate web of lights below me.

* * *

Not long ago, I attended a lecture by cultural theorist Homi Bhabha at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, in which he said in the opening remarks of his talk, which was on Kant and cosmopolitanism, that he had been "putting things together that had never been put together in that particular way before." "I have a whole set of reverberations," he said, "but no conclusions." This struck a chord with me, for more than drawing conclusions, "putting things together that had never been put together in that particular way before" has been my task in this book. I leave the reader to draw their own conclusions from the reverberations.

2. The View from the Top of the World Trade Center/"... this Lust to Be a Viewpoint and Nothing More"

As "Walking in the City" begins, De Certeau is standing atop the World Trade Center in New York City. The New York that he sees far below him turns, by virtue of his perspective, into a "picture"; its circumference perceptible, it becomes a representation, like a map or a painting. The actual life being lived among its buildings and streets is erased by the bird's-eye view, though De Certeau is still aware of its existence. This moment of standing far above the city leads De Certeau to the perception that, in fact, cognitively speaking, there are two cities: first, the city seen from a distance (in this case, from above), the city as *idea* (the "Concept-city"), immobile, "synchronic"—a cartographer's or painter's or urban planner's city (this city is a "text" that only turns legible from above). And second, as the camera zooms from the "panoptic vision" made available at the top of the World Trade Center down into the streets themselves, the city as *lived city*—a plethora of millions of wildly divergent individual experiences moving through time—which in turn nullifies the map, the picture. This second city is the city of stories, legends, myths. The man standing atop the World Trade Center enjoys panoptic vision; the people down below are "blind." According to De Certeau, the objective given of the first city, the Concept-city, as an administrative and legal entity within which each city-dweller is positioned, is appropriated

by the city-dweller—particularly the pedestrian[4]—through what he calls "tactics."

What are these tactics? The pedestrian, he writes, "goes only here and not there" (98). The pedestrian does or does not stop at a red stoplight, depending on how much of a hurry he is in or how he feels about authority, takes a shortcut through a back alley to get where she is going, stops to window-gaze at a bookshop but not at the jewelry store next to it, though both present themselves as equally available. Tactics render the city subjective, and thus transform it into the second city, the lived city. Both cities, the Concept-city and the lived city, coexist at all times, and a person is to varying degrees in a state of greater awareness of one or the other—which can be, as in the case of De Certeau's World Trade Center epiphany, a function of position and optical perception. The walker in the city is practicing "everyday life"—she is the individual tactically maneuvering with forces greater than she is, transforming herself with agency from a consumer into a producer.

This view from the top is a fantasy that has been in place since before such a viewpoint was even possible; it's the fantasy of the voyeur, who can observe without participating, who is turned, De Certeau writes, into "a solar Eye, looking down like a god" (92). The city from the top of a skyscraper is apprehended primarily as a spatial entity, while emphasis in the "lived city" leans toward the temporal. The city from above appears timeless—a train runs around a track like a toy train, around and around and around, suspended in a dreamlike tableau removed from the exigencies of time—while down below, it is the same train that a city-dweller is impatiently awaiting on a platform in Queens because he is worried about being late for work. With its panoptic vision, the solar Eye can see that the train is on its way; the worker, however, "blind," suc-

4. De Certeau posits an unmarked pedestrian in an idealized scheme, but of course walking in any city is always contingent upon the body doing that walking (or moving)—some bodies are more mobile than others, more welcomed than others, more able to recede into anonymity than others.

cumbs to anxiety and to rumors, i.e., stories, about the lateness of the train.

The representation of the city made possible by the verticality of the World Trade Center foregrounds its monolithic, monologic character. The view from the World Trade Center is

> the analogue of the facsimile produced, through a projection that is a way of keeping aloof, by the space planner urbanist, city planner or cartographer. . . . The voyeur-god created by this fiction . . . must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them. (92–93)

In other words, not only are dialogue, exchange, interaction, all rendered invisible, but the voyeur must actively "disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors," he must reject what Baudelaire called the huge city's "innumerable interrelations." The author is "a solar Eye looking down like a god," but, like many gods, he is a lonely god, and whatever language he emits is immediately swallowed up by the emptiness surrounding him at such a height. Once the "god" has disentangled himself from the crowd below, he can represent the city however he likes—as a map, as a picture, as a concept, as a poem spoken by an "I"—with minimal resistance from contending agencies.

De Certeau uses a number of different names for the Concept-city, the city that results from the vertical perspective: "geometrical space," "panoptic spatial organization," the "urbanistic system," among others—which reflects, in part, the fact that there is not just one Concept-city, but that "Concept-city" stands for a type of conceptualized thinking that is engendered by either literal or figurative positions (actual distance, as atop the World Trade Center, or imaginative distance, as in the work of the city planner). He also blurs his terms when writing about experience in the "lived city": at times it is a "poetic" experience of space, at others he characterizes it as a "pedestrian unfolding of the stories accumulated in a place" (110). For De Certeau, who was not a literary scholar as such, the slippage

between "poetry" and "stories" likely did not matter; he used them interchangeably to indicate, let's say, semantic activities of the imagination. But poetry and stories are not only fundamentally different types of activities of the imagination, as I will show, but in fact, through its association in literary theory and linguistics with verticality and with monologic utterance, the poetic actually shares more structural similarities with visions of "panoptic spatial organization" as enacted by standing atop the World Trade Center than it does with the "blind" walkers "writing" the text that is illegible to them down below. In this sense, the poetic perspective is equated with a totalizing vision shared by the city planner and the bureaucrat. The city planner, the bureaucrat, the mapmaker are all preoccupied with organizing space in a monologic fashion (even if they are working collectively—the collective's voice becomes one voice)—the dialogue enters in when these forms are put into practice, among contending subjectivities, in the lived city.

Later in his essay, when De Certeau is writing about the localizing tactics of legends and myth, which the hyperrationalized city tries to stamp out, he compares the Concept-city to a totalitarian system:

> It is a symptomatic tendency of functionalist totalitarianism . . . that it seeks precisely to eliminate these local authorities, because they compromise the univocity of the system. (106)

As we will see, the poem's association with monologism and the vertical place it in close relation to this very "univocity."

The paradox is that the texts of the Concept-city (laws, handbooks, protocols, histories, etc.) conjured from the vertical perspective are usually written in horizontal, non-literary prose. Once the perspective shifts, and the subject is walking through the streets, the effects of this legal and administrative entity take on real form and serve to control her actions and movements—laws, infrastructure, private vs. public space, etc. They become objective, factual, informational—"prosaic"—and it is this prosaic administration of the city against which she wields "tactics."

The prose that Baudelaire invited into his poems to form his hybrid "poems in prose" was that of fiction rather than nonfiction prose.[5] And the city as a space of dialogic encounters is, as we will see, a fictionalized space. The "god" of poetry loses his halo, as Baudelaire writes in the prose poem "Loss of a Halo," and enters into the prose of the city—either the dialogic prose of fiction, or non-literary, administrative and legal prose—and it is in the negotiation between them that the prose poem is born.

Any act of creativity is a kind of tactic. But we might consider Baudelaire's adoption of the prose poem in the context of Haussmann's Paris as a radical tactic to take back some of the agency threatened by the "huge city's"[6] growing crowds.

All this is what made me think, while reading De Certeau's essay, of Baudelaire's remark that his prose poems were called into being by his explorations of huge cities.

5. Though a case could also be made for another genre, that of the journalistic anecdote then coming into its own in newspapers. But even the journalistic anecdote rests on the mechanics of fictional narrative.

6. Let's briefly consider what "huge" means: Paris's population grew steadily throughout Baudelaire's lifetime; by 1846 it had surpassed one million inhabitants; New York City's population, by comparison, was about half a million in 1850. By 1890 (Whitman's deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1891), it had swelled to 1.5 million.