

Prose Poetry and Historical Ambiguity

Edwin Stockdale

Trajectory

January-May 1312

Edward and Piers sleep together, remapping the contours of their bodies. Snow-light is a parhelion through the window, glinting on silver plate. A horseback messenger at Knaresborough: Piers's wife, Margaret, given birth, a firstborn, Joan. *Felicitations to the proud father*. Edward takes Piers's tongue into his mouth. The men dress hurriedly, fingers caught in forest velvet, rush to York. Forty nights later Margaret is churched, purified. The Gavestons and Edward entertained by a minstrel, a dance involving swords and shields. Isabella makes her way north after Candlemas, the wooden carriage serrating vials of ice. Under shades of Venus through blurred edges of distorted glass Edward takes Isabella to bed: *now is the time*. Her womb quickens. Lancaster, Pembroke and Surrey begin their pursuit from the thawed Thames. Edward and Isabella, Piers and Margaret, head north-east. Past standing stones, the Devil's Arrows, and over the Ure at Boroughbridge. Isabella retches into watercress. The quartet carry on across Durham heathland to Newcastle. Lancaster closes in, breaches the garrison walls. Edward and Piers flee leaving war-horses, weapons, armour. No use for the ruby-set ring Edward calls the cherry or a gold cup studded with emeralds, citrine, amethyst, the one belonging to his mother. Edward and Piers arrive dishevelled at Tynemouth Priory. No rest behind fortified curtain walls, the rocky headland overlooking the North Sea. Lancaster continues his hunt. Edward and Piers put to sea beneath a fired sunset, a flight, arrive at Scarborough in a gale. Behind impregnable walls Edward parts from Piers. *I command you on pain of forfeiture not to surrender, even if I am brought before you as a prisoner*. Edward's voice breaks. He brushes Piers's cheek, the last touch. Edward leaves for York and Isabella. Piers besieged: starved, places himself in custody. Scarborough haunts Edward. The heron's grief sounds a grey ghost in its cry.

Heartstone

Warwick Castle

19 June 1312

The castle is a lattice. The picture is stitched together. I can't see through distorted glass. The lintels and tracery of the arched windows are warp and weft. I touch bloodied stone in the recesses of the castle. Piers Gaveston emerges from the shadows as the picture is unstitched. He is condemned to death under a tapestry sky. There is no time to seek spurred coral root. He is dragged through a snicket to Blacklow Hill. He is run through the heart, cleanly, with a sword. Beheaded. His head rolls under a furze bush. I feel the weathered sandstone of Gaveston's cross, listen to the oaks' hush.

The prose poem, it seems to me, particularly lends itself to certain aspects of historical biography, with which I engage in the above prose poems from a sequence in progress concerning Edward II and Piers Gaveston. As Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton have noted in recent landmark study of the form, "[p]rose poetry has the potential to cross the divide between the urge toward poetry – its capacity to articulate what is otherwise unsayable – and the more discursive and narrative-driven prose of novels, biographies and the like." (Hetherington and Atherton 2020: 6) The key word for me here is "unsayable," a term meaning that which cannot be expressed through the conventions of formal prose, but which I broaden out to also embrace that which cannot with certainty be known.

The difference between prose poetry and lineated poetry may be thought of as pertaining to its negotiation of space. As Luke Kennard asserts, for example, "Prose poetry is more spacious; it tends to contain complete sentences; it allows for more incongruity and complex yet visible patterns." (Kennard 2018: 253) The dynamic

between the prose poem and the surrounding white space is thus more mutable, for although the neat-edged form appears more contained, it is effectively more volatile, the arrangement of its parts ever-changing on different pages and with different voices. This difference creates what may be thought of as a dissonant harmony of unsettled elements.

The energy thus created within its circumscribed shape on the page not only reconfigures space but also, as Paul Munden observes, makes it ideal for enacting startling shifts in time. (Munden 2017) As Munden notes, the prose poem “blurs” these shifts, even as it blurs the categorical distinctions between poetry and prose. Within the hazy fringes of shifting time there are ghost-like qualities haunting the text, and it is at this point of unresolved mutability and otherness that we may unearth the mystery which lies at the heart of the prose poem.

Further, on movement and stasis in the prose poem, Hetherington and Atherton argue that prose poetry is: “looking forwards and backwards, understanding transitions, providing passages and doorways. ... It understands both prose and poetry, and it comfortably inhabits the space between them.” (Hetherington and Atherton 2015: 279) However, while prose poetry “comfortably” occupies the space between prose and poetry, at the same time, prose poetry is *uncomfortable*, thriving, as I have suggested, on tension, and charged with the dissonant harmony of its clashing elements. The core of this dynamic tension is encapsulated in Hazel Smith’s observation that, “Prose poetry ... by its very nature ... questions the division between poetry and prose.” (Smith 2005: 183)

The prose poem’s energy is, then, born in this space in which uncertain, sometimes contradictory, divisions are interrogated. Drawing on the prose poem’s uncertain definitions and its easy ability to incorporate – or even invite – fragmentation and disjunction, both spatial and temporal, I suggest that it is a particularly apt form with which to approach the contested details of unknowable history.

Prose poetry offers writers a space in which physical, formal, and temporal distinctions may not be quite where we expect them to be, in which we may encounter and explore the silences and ambiguities of unknown and unspoken histories. It is precisely this which recommends the form so perfectly for aspects of my poetic sequence relating to events surrounding the life of Edward II and Piers Gaveston, with both its action and its main protagonist(s) drawing layer upon layer of conflicting interpretations around an enigmatically unknowable centre. As Seymour Phillips points out: “Edward II was an enigma in his time and in some respects he remains an enigma now” (Phillips 2010: 613), and interpretations of Edward II’s character – and indeed the events of his life – remain fraught with contested divisions.

Works cited:

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