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TORILD WARDENÆR

A prose poem is often defined as a non-metrical text with full lines, divided into paragraphs rather than verses. The modern prose poem can be dated back to Charles Baudelaire’s ‘Petits poèmes en prose’, published posthumously in 1869. In a Norwegian context, however, Sigbjørn Obstfelder is often referred to as a precursor, having written a distinctive prose poem in the 1890s. Torild Wardenær, born in Stavanger in 1951, operates within the same tradition. She made her debut in 1994 with a prize-winning collection of poems, *I pionertiden* (In the Pioneer Age), in which she demonstrates consummate mastery not only of the descriptive prose poem and the imagist short poem, but also of more pathos-filled texts that take a metaphysical angle. Effortlessly, often with a wry little smile, she makes language sound mysterious, roving through everyday life, nature, geography, history, philosophy, imagination and the dream. Wardenær is often seized with the Metaphysical poets’ desire to employ vocabulary from different disciplines – physics, astronomy, biology, physiology – with highly surprising insights as a result.

The title *null komma to lux* (nought point two lux, 1995) refers to the light intensity of a full moon: Wardenær, it seems, remains reluctant to switch on the floodlights and let all her secrets be revealed. Her aim in this collection is poetry that appears clear and bright but has dark corners; poems that offer resistance and rouse curiosity, following René Char’s advice that ‘the poet must leave traces of his passage, not proof’. Even more clearly than earlier works, this collection establishes Wardenær as an eruptive, painterly poet with an unconventional viewpoint.

The title of Wardenær’s next collection, *Houdini til minne* (In memory of Houdini, 1997) alludes to the legendary American escapologist and illusionist. The unifying theme of the forty poems is the feeling of being bound – by the body, by language, in the straitjacket between birth and death – and the will to escape from what holds one back. Everyday episodes broaden out into universal, staggering questions; different spheres of life merge into each other. After this came *Døgn drift* (The Drift of Days and Nights, 1998), the allusive title pointing towards the core of Wardenær’s writing in terms of its themes and motifs. The first section has connotations of cyclic time – the hours roll by, the days pass, the seasons change. The concept of ‘drift’ is mainly connected to the body and desire; to something dynamic, fluid, unstable.

The ambiguous, portentous title *Titanporten* (*The titan gate*, 2001) refers to Greek mythology, in which the Titans are demi-gods who combat Zeus for world supremacy. 'Titan' is also the name of one of Saturn's moons; and evokes the light, almost unbreakable, metal titanium. A 'gate(way)' can be open or shut; it can represent a barrier or lead one into new spaces, new landscapes, new spheres. Most of the 56 pieces in this collection are in the form of prose poems, with long, image-packed sentences that challenge normal language, forcing the reader to think anew. A lovelorn individual once more commutes between earth, sky, body and soul; between everyday, sensual observations, metaphysical insight and visionary conceptions, incorporating contrasting emotions, surrealist dream sequences and a recurring fascination with numbers and highly diverse disciplines. Taken as a whole, the poetry in this collection is boldly demanding, full of different viewpoints and not unexpectedly making open references to other artists; 'time' is the thematic focal point. Pathos merges with sober statement; gravity with self-deprecation and sardonic humour. The tone fluctuates constantly, never remaining at a fixed, predictable pitch.

Paradiseffekten (*The Paradise effect*, 2004) emphasises again Wardenær's robust writing style. She retains the prose poem and the single voice, conveying an avalanche of experiences, fantasies and thoughts. As in much of her work, she employs a vocabulary that at times is linked to the sensory, at times to more intellectual deliberations, but in which the conflict between the subdued and the exuberant is ever-present, and the awareness of death is a corrective to hallelujah-tinged vitalism. The title, as always, has been chosen with care. In the idea of 'paradise' lie religious connotations, announcing the poet's metaphysical concerns and the magical-utopian experiences or conceptions that are embedded in many of the poems. In contrast, an 'effect' refers to a more scientific cast of mind and to the rationality she alternately relies on and dismisses.

Paradiseffekten comprises a variety of rhythmic and close-knit texts, including an anti-war poem and reflections on the mysterious world of figures and complex images that accompany man during his sojourn on earth. The poems travel up and down like a lift between various levels of meaning, without coming to rest in an individual line or formulation. Wardenær works like Pablo Neruda in *Canto General*, piling up words, building and embroidering, attaining a massive block-like effect via a powerful, unorthodox discharge of the imagination.

The title of Wardenær's most recent 2007 collection, *psi*, refers to the penultimate letter of the Greek alphabet and is also a symbol used in mathematics and logic; more specifically, it is the symbol of the quantum physicist Schrödinger's wave equation. Via a bundle of numbered prose poems – all with the same initial word, 'Arvestykke' (something inherited), in the title – the

collection builds on Wardenær's ambitious project, switching between the languages of science, mathematics and metaphysics to achieve new insights. Unsurprisingly, it deals with ideas associated with both material and aesthetic inheritance.

Torild Wardenær has also translated work by the American poet James Tate and has written plays for various Norwegian theatres.