

DRO

Deakin University's Research Repository

The prose poem as Igel: a reading of fragmentation and closure in prose poetry

Citation:

Atherton, Cassandra and Hetherington, Paul 2016, The prose poem as Igel: a reading of fragmentation and closure in prose poetry, *Axon: creative explorations*, Issue C1.

© 2016, The Authors

Reproduced with permission.

Originally published online at: <http://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-c1/prose-poem-igel>

Available from Deakin Research Online:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30086419>

THE PROSE POEM AS IGEL

A Reading of Fragmentation and Closure in Prose Poetry

This paper takes up Nikki Santilli's lament about the scarcity of scholarship on the prose poem in English to analyse two key features of prose poetry: fragmentation and closure. This paper argues that the prose poem's visual containment within the paragraph form promises a complete narrative while simultaneously subverting this visual cue by offering, instead, gaps and spaces. Such apertures render the prose poem a largely fragmentary form that relies on metonymic metamorphoses to connect to a larger, unnamed frame of reference. In this way, the prose poem is both complete and yet searching for completeness, closed and lacking closure.

The prose poem's reaching outwards to embrace a larger, absent whole connects this literary form to Friedrich Schlegel's 'Athenaeum Fragment 206' and to the Romantic critical fragment more generally. 'Athenaeum Fragment 206' has provided this paper with its title, as a metaphorical reading of Schlegel's igel, or hedgehog, as fragment 'implies the existence of [a form that suggests] what is outside itself' (Rosen 1995: 48). The final section of this paper, analyses two prose poems from the University of Canberra's International Poetry Studies Institute's Prose Poetry Project. These works by Jen Webb and Carrie Etter are read for their appeal to metonymy in their exploration of time passing and ultimately, death. They demonstrate that prose poetry is both fragmented and open ended in ways very different from lineated poems.

Keywords: prose poetry—fragment—closure—incomplete—metonym

1. Introduction

In his paper, 'Between Virtue and Innocence', Adam Geczy laments the 'dearth of support for prose poems, poetic fragments and tableau fiction in Australia' (2001: 1). He points to the fact that prose poetry in Australia is a relatively marginal literary form, which is also true in the English-speaking world more generally. Prose poetry is unable to be classified as a genre in its own right yet does not sit comfortably within existing generic classifications. It neither possesses all of the characteristics that are the usual hallmarks of narrative prose works, nor all of the hallmarks of lyric poetry. In discussing such issues, Hetherington and Atherton remark that:

Prose poetry may well be a form that implicitly asserts, and reveals, significant continuities between poetry and prose that deserve further discussion, and may even suggest that poetry and prose are genres that always tend to bleed into one another. (2015: 268)

However, whatever continuities there may be 'between poetry and prose', there are also significant differences between lyric poetry—as it is usually understood—and prose poetry. Important among these

differences are the fragmentary nature of much prose poetry and its reliance on metonymy, along with the associated issue of prose poetry's resistance to the kinds of formal closure so often found in lyric poetry.

Poetic closure is discussed at some length below but at this juncture it is perhaps sufficient to note with Barbara Herrnstein Smith that 'the reader's sense of finality will be reinforced by the appearance, at the conclusion of a poem, of certain formal and thematic elements' (Smith 1968: 30). Such formal elements are missing from almost all prose poems, which can influence their initial reception. Geczy observes that '[t]he prose poem is not a nexus between poetry and prose, as if the two were reconciled' (2001: 2); the relationship is more complicated and mutable.

In remarking on the difficulties of the prose poem form and 'the relative neglect of the prose poem in English' (2002: n.pag.), Kevin Brophy cites T.S. Eliot's preface to St John Perse's *Anabasis*, in which Eliot conducts a brief apologia for the prose poetry form: '[t]he justification of such abbreviation of method is that the sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression' (1977: 10) and 'the reader of a prose poem should take at least as much trouble as a barrister reading an important decision on a complicated case' (1977: 10). Eliot was more enthusiastic about Perse's prose poetry than he was about the idea of *Vers libre*, which he stated 'does not exist' (1991: 183).

For Eliot, 'there is no freedom in art' (1991: 184) and, in commenting on St John Perse's work, he contends that:

it would be convenient if poetry were always verse—either accented, alliterative, or quantitative; but that is not true. Poetry may occur, within a definite limit on one side, at any point along a line of which the formal limits are 'verse' and 'prose'. I may suggest that a writer, by using, as does Mr. Perse, certain exclusively poetic methods, is sometimes able to write poetry in what is called prose. (1977: 11)

Despite Eliot's enthusiasm for a French prose poetry work that he rated as 'of the same importance as the later work of James Joyce' (1977: 12), Brophy points out (2002: n.pag.) that Eliot wrote only one prose poem himself—the fairly lightweight 'Hysteria' (Eliot 1968: 34)—and was one of the many influential English-language modernists who evinced little real interest in the form. Rather than a deliberate oversight, Steven Monte argues that '[t]he prose poem was not avoided so much [by English-language poets] as not seen as missing, if seen at all' (2000: 12). More recently, Nikki Santilli finds that 'the British prose poem ... has so far been neglected in anthologies and commentaries' (2002: 17). Thomas Shapcott (2002) and Moya Costello (1999 and 2002) have unearthed rich developments of the form by Australians, but there is still no full-length study of the prose poem in Australia. Santilli's book remains the only full study of the British prose poem.

Santilli reflects that, 'it is the character of [prose poems] ... to preface a (missing) work that ensures their continuing marginal status in literary history' (2002: 39):

if the fragment/project is not the work itself but only refers to the work, and that work exists only in the past, the future, or is misplaced in the present then it can only be said to be absent ... this is the strongest point of resemblance between Romantic fragmentation and the prose poem. Both forms project an event beyond themselves as the locus of their own sublimation into a unifying synthesis. (2002: 38)

These observations are important in identifying an elusiveness of the form that (at least to date) has been resistant to the development of any sustained critical discourse in Australia. Even in other

countries, criticism has been patchy and Monte observes that ‘academic interest in prose poetry has varied considerably over the years’ (2000: 6) after taking off, rather unevenly ‘in the late 1970s and the 1980s’ (2000: 5).

This paper takes as its starting point Santilli’s concept of the prose poem as prefacing a missing work, in order to read the form as both fragmented and one that resists the kind of closure characteristic of many lined poems. It does so partly because of the way it depends on, and simultaneously subverts, the visual and other cues suggested by its paragraph form. The paper will use the Schlegelian analogy of the *igel* to argue for prose poetry as a fragment that is complete in itself (through being incomplete) while also signalling a larger, absent whole. Just as the hedgehog is both connected to the world and simultaneously shielding itself against it, the prose poem is connected to the genres of prose and poetry, and yet autonomous. The final section of the paper then applies these insights to analyses of two prose poems produced through a project of the International Poetry Studies Institute at the University of Canberra. This is an international practice-led research project, the *Prose Poetry Project*, in which 21 participants write and exchange prose poems by email.

2. Fragmentation

In an attempt to define or pin down the prose poem, scholars such as Monroe (1987), Richards (1998), Delville (1998), Costello (1999) and Santilli (2002), either identify prose poems as fragments or argue that prose poetry is a fragmented form. Baudelairean scholar Marvin Richards speaks of ‘the fragment-ruin of prose poetry’, illustrating the way in which the alignment of these concepts—ruin, fragment and prose poem—emphasises how each is ‘[a]t once whole and standing alone, while also incomplete and standing for a greater whole’ (Richards 1998: 15). Noting Romanticism’s predilection for ruins, scholars such as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1988), Bradshaw (2007), McFarland (1981), Robinson (2012) and Levinson (1986), connect Romantic Fragment Poetry to prose poetry. Santilli develops this connection by stating, ‘[t]he Romantic fragment provides the ideological basis for the prose poem form’ (2002: 31). Her linking of fragment and prose poem is reliant upon their twinned need to ‘represent totality’ and the ‘fragmentary way this is achieved’ (2002: 39). We also discuss the prose poem’s connection to the Romantic fragment at some length in our article ‘Like a Porcupine or Hedgehog?: The prose poem as post-Romantic fragment’ (2016), and we draw briefly on that discussion here.

The German Romantic critical fragment has been touted as ‘the first substantial prose poetic form to emerge in the Romantic period’ (Santilli 2002: 31) and this connection of the prose poem to the Romantic critical fragment has provided this paper with its title. In Friedrich Schlegel’s *Athenaeum Fragment 206*, he states:

A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine. (1971: 189)

As with Peter Firchow, who translated the fragment above, ‘porcupine’ is often understood to be synonymous with the German *igel*, yet Charles Rosen points out that *igel* in German is synonymous with a hedgehog. The significance of this is that the porcupine is bigger and more aggressive than the hedgehog, and can discharge its quills, while the hedgehog’s spines cannot be released. Michael Bradshaw discusses this analogy with enthusiasm:

[it] is brilliantly chosen, capturing a mixture of independence, obstinacy and comedy in the

fragment's much-prized rejection of attempts to contain or absorb it: the fragment is a creature which possesses agency and mobility, and when threatened, will present its jagged edges to ward off the interfering wider world. (2008: 79)

In this way, the hedgehog (and fragment) may, as it were, 'be separated from the rest of the universe, but it implies the existence of what is outside itself not by reference but by its instability. The form is not fixed but torn apart or exploded by paradox, by ambiguity' (Rosen 1995: 51). All of this is to suggest that the prose poem stands in relation to other forms of poetry somewhat as the *igel* stands in relation to its world—its form is jagged and unsettled, resisting closure, and it may not even be easily named except through combining concepts—poetry and prose—that, by themselves, do not fit the form and which, together, still seem to misname it. Like the *igel* being mistranslated as 'porcupine', 'prose poetry' as a phrase is a poor way of encapsulating the shifting and fragmentary nature of the nearly genreless and sometimes spiny works that it attempts to name.

Historically, although the Bible contains what one might name as prose poems, and while many fables and myths may also be identified as prose poetry (see, for example, Brown: 319), the form is largely charted as beginning with Aloysius Bertrand's *Gaspard de la Nuit—Fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot* (1842). Richards identifies this text's 'fragment-totality' (1998: 89) while Mansell Jones argues that such works contain 'detached, scrupulously wrought fragment[s], produced with strict attention to form and effect' (1968: 97). Because Baudelaire uses Bertrand's text as a prototype for his *Les Petits Poèmes en prose: Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), these two significant texts demonstrate that aside from the Romantic fragment poem and the German Romantic critical fragment, prose poetry is also aligned with the fragment in the French Symbolist tradition.

Interestingly, Bertrand's and Baudelaire's books of prose poetry extend the argument concerning how a fragment is both whole and yet incomplete. Richards suggests that Bertrand's text 'hesitates between a "prose" organisation of the "book" understood as a whole ... and the "poetic" organization in which the book represents a collection of autonomous texts—or fragments' (Richards 1998: 15). Similarly, in Baudelaire's book, the prose poems are likened to 'fragments of a serpent "without head or tail", destined to be hacked up into as many pieces as the editor or reader desires' (Bray 2014: 115). In this way, individual prose poems may be understood as autonomous and yet can also function as a preface—not just to a larger missing work, but to the greater and yet unrealised potential 'whole' of the book or sequence of prose poems in which it is published.

This tendency of prose poems to open outwards to reference what is beyond their explicit content is frequently one of their key features. Richards, quoting Max Milner points out that:

Bertrand[s] ... texts open up at the end into 'a surreal temporality, [an] elasticity of time.'
Bertrand's poems have 'uncanny final images [that invite] the reverie to prolong its echoes,' or chutes that 'instead of closing on itself, open it [the poem] onto a kind of indefinite future'
(Richards 1998: 52)

It may seem unsurprising that fragmented works tend to be open forms with 'indefinite future(s)', unfinished and sometimes suggestive of what is broken or only partially seen. It may seem unsurprising, too, that such works resist closure because of their incompleteness. But where art and poetry is concerned, a consideration of closure also raises other issues.

3. Prose poetry and closure

In one sense, many poems are open forms. The high level of suggestiveness of numerous formal and free verse poems is wider than any interpretation of them may provide, and they seem protean, too, in that they frequently acquire new meanings with new generations of readers. We do not, for example, read Shakespeare's sonnets in exactly the way that Shakespeare's contemporaries read them. We bring new assumptions about humanity and society to our readings of these works and, in any case, some of the language Shakespeare used has altered in its meaning, often in fundamental ways. When he says 'gentle' in the line 'Gentle thou art' in Sonnet XLI (1997: n.pag.)—an important word in these sonnets; he uses it 15 times in the 154-poem sequence—we have largely lost one of the word's primary meanings. It used to signify possession of 'the qualities appropriate to a gentleman ... align[ed] ... with a particular status and rank in society' (Coombs 2009: 77).

However, despite the shifting meanings and protean suggestiveness of so much lyric poetry, Barbara Herrnstein Smith observes that formally constructed poems relying to a significant extent on metre and other formal poetic devices tend to be 'framed', much like a painting, and thus are separated 'from a "ground" of less highly structured speech and sound' (1968: 24). In other words, the attention to line beginnings and endings—and poetic beginnings and endings more generally—in lineated poetry is very different to other kinds of less formalised writing, including in prose poetry where lines are drawn together in paragraphs, rather than separated. Significantly, prose poetry refuses the rhythmic closure of a lineated poem.

Smith also makes a distinction between the 'integrity' of a poetic utterance, involving 'the sense of internal coherence and distinct identity' and the sense of '*completeness*' (1968: 25; emphasis original). She points out that '[e]ven a[n incomplete] poetic fragment has coherence and a distinct identity ... [but] [i]t will not, however, have closure' (1968: 25-26). For Smith, this is a highly significant issue, because she suggests that:

it may be that we acknowledge a poem as whole or complete when, for various *other* reasons, we experience at its conclusion the sense of closure ... [and] closure is often strengthened by convention: the reader's sense of finality will be reinforced by the appearance, at the conclusion of a poem, of certain formal and thematic elements.' (1968: 26 and 30; emphasis original)

Approaches to 'closure' are likely to differ markedly between the lineated poem and prose poem and are connected to the fragmentary nature of prose poems. Michel Delville articulates this in his review of Stephen Fredman's *The Poet's Prose*:

On a formal and structural level, having the sentence rather than the verse line as the basic compositional unit of 'poet's prose' enables the poet to indulge in an endless series of narrative and speculative digressions that '[resist] the gravitational pull of the complete thought' at the same time as they pre-empt the possibility of poetic closure. (1998: n.pag.)

Furthermore, Robert Alexander argues that when a reader approaches a prose poem, the right and left justified form prepares them for the paragraph, rather than the stanza. In this way, the prose poem subverts reader expectations by preparing them to accept a story rather than a poem:

When we open a book, we approach the piece of writing in the context of our knowledge of literature. This knowledge serves as the frame within which we see the particular book we're reading ... The impulse of prose, it seems to me, is to tell a story—a story grounded in the real world—and this is true whether we are reading a newspaper, a letter, a biography, or a novel. Prose can therefore speak of everyday experience in ways difficult if not impossible for free verse ... (1996: xxv)

In other words, the prose poem's containment within one or more paragraphs—something readers immediately register as a visual cue—promises a contained, reasonably complete and narrative-driven rendering of experience, yet delivers instead a fragmented narrative replete with (in metaphorical terms) gaps and spaces. The prose poem's brevity is at odds with the usual, or conventional, expectations attached to the reading of prose and, as a result, the reader is left wondering: 'What happens next?', 'Where is the rest of this narrative?', and 'What comes after the final line?' The visual attributes of the block of text—from its borders to its rectangular shape—encourage readers to anticipate a complete story and they receive something very different indeed. Shapcott argues that the form of the prose poem undermines a wide range expectations:

Very often the 'poetic' part of the prose poem is expressed through an appeal to illogic: to states of receptivity which deny what we have come to expect prose to offer—that is, rational discourse, descriptive clarity, even rhetoric in its conventional sense of persuasion, of using language to set certain cogs in motion. The prose poem creates its lyrical frisson by pointing the reader's anticipatory glands in that direction, and then somehow working a change. (2002: n.pag.)

It is for these reasons that the prose poem may be said to be both complete and searching for completeness (searching for something that it will never be able to achieve). It is connected to larger frames of reference, turning most often on its use of metonymy to cite that which is missing or that which it is unable to encompass. In this way, metonymy is a key feature of the prose poem's resistance to closure and its associated emphasis on gaps and spaces.

4. Prose poetry and metonymy

To the best of our knowledge, the importance of metonymic structures to prose poetry has been noticed by a number of people but not been explored in any depth. For instance, Andy Brown—who perhaps underplays the way in which prose poets may have recourse to disguised metrical and 'other prosodic' effects—points out the ways in which the lyric poet may have a greater arsenal of poetic tools at their disposal, but the prose poet is able to hone their appeal to this absence:

The fact that all poets look for patterns in the signs of their poem is obvious, but its functions are foregrounded in the prose poem when the prose poet lacks recourse to other formal concerns (stanzaic shape, verse form, meter and other prosodic effects) most commonly associated with lineated verse. It is also most clearly seen in the rhetorical function of metonymy ... it deals with the synecdochal details standing in for the absent whole. The conjuring of the absent context is a necessary feature of words and prose poems. (Brown 2012: 325)

The conventional understandings of metonymy and synecdoche are easily obtainable from any dictionary. For example, the Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines the former term as 'a figure of speech consisting of the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated (as "crown" in "lands belonging to the crown")'.

However, it has now been conclusively established that metonymy works in much more complex ways than this definition suggests. It is one of the principle characteristics of human thought, which tends to be associative, digressive and ramifying, while locating its meanings through what might be described as a series of complex movements that interpenetrate and sometimes transform linguistic (and imagistic, sensory or embodied) connections and conceptual frameworks. Simultaneously, it distributes these connections and conceptual frameworks into new and developing contexts. Jeannette Littlemore

comments:

Metonymy can ... be seen as a cognitive process that we use all the time when we use language or ... any form of symbolic communication. When metonymic thinking is active, new metonymies may emerge ... Metonymic thinking becomes more apparent when novel metonymies are produced, or when we encounter metonymies that are new to us, such as when we are exposed to new languages or enter new discourse communities (2015: 13).

According to Roman Jakobson metonymy is more closely associated with realism and prose than 'the literary schools of [poetic] romanticism and symbolism' (2002: 43) and:

underlies and actually predetermines the so-called 'realistic' trend ... Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synecdochic details. In the scene of Anna Karenina's suicide Tolstoj's artistic attention is focused on the heroine's handbag. (2002: 43)

Metonymy may be of such central importance to the functioning of prose poetry—rich as prose poetry is with novel metonymies and representing, as it does, a discourse community of its own (neither quite being 'poetry' nor quite being 'realist' prose)—that we will quote Radden and Kövecses at length on the way metonymy functions. (It should be borne in mind that the following passage is only descriptive of some aspects of metonymic processes.):

The impact which ICMs [idealized cognitive models] may have on metonymic (and metaphorical) transfer shall be illustrated by way of the changes of meaning which the word *hearse* underwent in the history of English ... In medieval farming, the word originally denoted a triangular harrow with pins and was then metaphorically applied to a triangular frame for supporting candles at church services. The new 'candle-frame ICM' evoked the functionally most salient part of it, the candles. Our general knowledge of the 'candle-ICM', in its turn, gave rise to the metonymic focus on the process of burning. In the Middle Ages, candles were made of wax, were very expensive and were only lit for special occasions. This Medieval 'candle-burning ICM' explains why the burning of candles came to be metonymically associated with a special liturgical occasion, Tenebrae, the Holy Week before Easter. The Medieval 'Tenebrae ICM' accounts for a further metonymic step. In the church service of the Holy Week, all candles were gradually extinguished to commemorate the darkness at Christ's crucifixion. The burning candle was a metaphor for man's life, and, as an entailment, its extinction a metaphor for man's death ... The 'funeral ICM' involves several parts, many of which were described by the word *hearse* ... Among these parts, the moving carriage eventually appeared to be the most salient element. (1999: 20; emphasis original)

Such an account demonstrates how profoundly language works through various complex metonymic and metaphorical processes, which in turn are connected to the tangible experiential world, to take on complex meanings. Prose poetry depends to a large extent on such processes and associations, more-or-less liberated (or deprived) as it is from issues of formal *enclosure* (the strictures of poetic form, including metre) and the rhythmic and conventional *closure* of more conventional lineated poetry. Even lineated free verse, precisely because of its lineation, to some extent invokes such expectations of formal closure. Herrnstein Smith writes that 'the rhythm of a free-verse poem, as it is reflected in and reinforced by its lineation, is experienced as an expectation of the recurrence of certain distribution patterns of formal features' (1968: 85-86).

It may not be an exaggeration to suggest—and our analyses below aim to demonstrate in a preliminary way aspects of this process at work—that a great deal of prose poetry (though not all) *depends on* and continually exploits as its primary poetic mechanism the metonymic (and associated metaphorical) resources of language. In individual prose poems one does not see the shifts in meaning that occurred to the word ‘hearse’ over many centuries, but one does encounter language flowing from image to association, and then to connected (or disjunct) images and associations, constructing meanings through activating not only the richness of the effects of juxtapositioning and contiguity, but through activating many of the largely suppressed secondary and tertiary meanings of words and their associations—along with the suggestiveness of sensory imagery that potentially bring whole conceptual ‘worlds’ (or idealised cognitive models) into play. In conventional poems, such meanings are to some extent guided, inhibited and directed by the disposition of poetic lines, and the closing effects of metre.

In prose poetry, such meanings tend to nestle together into their paragraphs and to feed exponentially off one another. As they do so, and as they defeat expectations of either narrative or poetic closure, so they open into the place of (what they imply to be) limitless metonymic substitutions and evolutions. At their best, prose poems hint at the protean infinitudes of language (language released from more utilitarian and quotidian purposes). In their fragmented, incomplete and unclosed state they remind the reader that subjectivity itself, articulated and understood through language, is only ever understandable in fragmentary moments—experiences informed by and yet separated from the whole of a life. The characteristics of memory—and its always provisional articulations of the self—and prose poetry, may be more alike than we realise. And, in this light, the prose poem may—at least potentially—preface not just the ideal and unachievable complete book, or complete work, but the infinitude of all possible works that, in any aspect of its utterance, it may suggest to one or other reader.

5. Poems from the Prose Poetry Project

The International Poetry Studies Institute at the University of Canberra began the *Prose Poetry Project* in pilot form in November 2014 and extended it into the development of the project proper in early 2015, which continues at the time of writing. This is an international practice-led research project in which 21 participants, write and exchange prose poems by email, and the project has realised well over 1,000 new prose poems by group members to date. Individual works are frequently generated in an informal ‘dialogue’ with prose poems already circulated among the group. This section analyses two prose poems from the *Prose Poetry Project* to draw out and illustrate some of the ideas addressed in this article.

The first prose poem, by Jen Webb, foregrounds absence in its exploration of death:

He died when I was away from home, not knowing it would happen, not expecting that something so momentous could arrive without its having made an appointment, but he did anyway die, and me without my thoughts straight without my face on without the words to say ready on my tongue. The world is too big in his absence, it takes a week to cross the street a month to make that call. The world is too big and there is no space in it for all the words we failed to share. (Webb 2016: n.pag.)

Ambiguity is evident from the first line, where Webb’s strategy of refusing to anchor key phrases to either of the pronouns she introduces at the poem’s opening makes it unclear whether it is the ‘I’ or the ‘he’ who did not ‘know [death] would happen’. The suggestion is that they are twinned in their unawareness and unpreparedness, and the event that occurs is so ‘momentous’ that there was—and there remains now—no words to speak of it properly, nor any way to adequately register the import of

its occurrence. The phrase, 'without the words to say ready on my tongue' stands in metonymically for every failure to make sense of the event at the time and since, and the phrase even folds back onto the words of this prose poem, suggesting that these are belated and still-unready words that '[fail] to share'.

As the prose poem opens out, Webb infers that while death may be inevitable, unexpected death is unfaceable as well as all-encompassing in its consequences. Death's unpredictability is acknowledged in the drawing together of the first three lines with a series of commas, and in the rush of fragments overlapping in the fourth line. In this way time is extended, while simultaneously being visually compressed in the prose poem's tight block of text. The phrases almost seem to pant, as if they are a (metonymic) expression of a general sense of panic. And it is significant that the prose poem begins *in medias res* with the narrator 'away from home'. The reader is never privy to why the narrator is absent when death occurs, creating an important gap in the narrative and signalling that a specific absence stands, metonymically, for the protagonist's continual, unrelenting sense of absence since.

In a metonymic cause-and-effect moment, death occurs because home is safe and the narrator is absent from this space. Her vulnerability is captured in the way she is exposed, '[w]ithout my face on'. This metaphor referencing make-up also suggests a mask, and perhaps even contains a subdued reference to the idea of death mask. The narrator's unpreparedness is unable to be 'masked' by anything she had recourse to at the time, and remains unmaskeable now. More viscerally, the prose poem's long introduction initially liberates breathing, leading to the effect of panting discussed above. Roger Robinson argues, 'to free a poem of its line breaks frees a poem of its breath' (2011: n.pag) but, in this case, the freedom from line breaks does not so much free the poem from its breath, as liberate Webb to create complex, run-on prose-poetic rhythms out of her breathing. This emphasis on breath, and its gathering rhythms, emphasises the life force that death has taken away.

The work's references to moments bigger than itself—to a larger frame—is evident from the repetition of the words 'too big' and the use of fragments to metonymically connect to larger memories and moments. In this way, the prose poem's small block of text opens out to embrace a 'world' that is connoted by, or housed within, its parameters. The work's limitless 'bigs' include life and death, absence and presence and the Audenian slowing of time for friends and family after death. There is 'no space' and yet, through the use of fragmented, suggestive and metonymic moments, the prose poem accommodates much more than it is.

Significantly, this work resists closure by ending on words that are unuttered. In this way, the reader considers: What happened to the narrator? Did she arrive home? Who was the man and what was their relationship? And, were there specific words she 'failed to share'? These absences are representative of a larger, absent whole that is referenced only in overlapping fragments of lamentation. By the work's conclusion, an intimate's death and subsequent absence becomes a metonym for every significant absence the narrator has known since.

Carrie Etter's prose poem is similarly concerned with the passing of time and turns on a series of gaps and fragments that explore brevity:

The day marked by the brevity of its light, the arrival of holiday bills through the mail slot: or so they say. The '70s sunburst clock ticks second by second, and a cat moans from under a radiator: this is winter, cold, isolate, fierce. Few have the strength to raise a knife. (2016: n.pag.)

This work begins with an ambiguous use of the pronoun 'they' in a doomy characterisation of shortening days. This unnamed 'they' can be read as a pronoun that metonymically stands in for the idea of common knowledge—which the narrator is forced to accept in the absence of any contrary

indications. ‘They’ suggest that when holiday bills arrive by post summer is finally obliterated. The use of this plural pronoun, coupled with the imagery of ‘holiday bills’ dropping through the ‘slot’, suggests surveillance of the domestic, and an unsettling of the idea of home via the delivery of the daily post.

Indeed ‘holiday bills’—an almost oxymoronic phrase—suggests what this poem conjures is not only the end of longer days, but a time to pay for the good times. Darkness prevails over light—not just literally in this prose poem but metaphorically—as happiness gives way to Winter’s broken narrative: ‘cold, isolate, fierce’ and a ‘cat moan[ing] under the radiator’. The tocking of the clock ‘second by second’ represents a countdown of more carefree times as days of sunlight are gone in a flash ‘or sunburst’, while time is drawn out in the darker period of winter. The clock itself references a time more than 45 years in the past, indicating that while time doesn’t slow, its steady pace soon accumulates many years. In this way, the work explores how the lived, subjective experience of time is different to its measurement. In the prose poem, light has all but gone.

Etter uses metaphors to investigate brevity and the prose poem form squeezes her fulmination into a four line block of text. The last line is ominous in its open endedness. While it can be read as referring to the bone coldness of winter and how disinclined people are to move, the use of the knife and its ‘rais[ing]’ is a final and unresolved threat. Death is close, it suggests, and resolutions may be fatal. ‘The day’ contains a great deal of oblique and suppressed significance. And, in resisting closure, the prose poem suggests that the narrator may be one of the few who can pick up a knife in the cold, although the reader is not privy to where the raised knife comes to rest; it remains worryingly and tantalisingly airborne. In this way, Etter’s prose poem is broadly metonymic, its series of brief, ominous reflections connoting a more general anxiety about the transience of all things. ‘[T]he brevity of its light’ is a metonym for a great deal more than the day’s decline—it represents no less than a pained awareness of mortality and an awareness of the passingness and absence at the heart of human existence.

6. Conclusion

Prose poetry is unlike lineated poetry for a wide range of reasons, and we have only touched on some of these unlikenesses in this paper. What is clear, however, is that because prose poetry eschews key resources and characteristics of lineated lyric poetry, and renounces closure, it is a fundamentally fragmented, open and unresolvable form that relies to a very considerable extent on metonymic substitutions and transformations. Every prose poem fragment is complete in itself, not because it brings very much to a close, but because it opens out into places that imply that any number of fruitful metonymic associations and substitutions may be read into small paragraphs; and that meaning, wherever it is articulated, always remains provisional—that every prose poem is only one ‘take’ on experience that may, at least in theory, also be articulated in other ways.

The *igel*-as-prose-poem’s spines are not so much spines as tightly spaced conduits into ramifying associations and meanings. Their packed condensation paradoxically connotes the wide world that the prose poem moves through. This is presence largely understood through tropes of absence and indeterminacy. The prose poem as fragment signals that completion and closure are, after all, primarily literary matters; that in the larger world, ‘second by second’, new meanings are always being made.

Works cited:

A Companion to Poetic Genre 2012, ed Erik Martiny, Oxford: John Wiley and Sons

Alexander, Robert 1996 'PROSE/POETRY', in Robert Alexander, Mark Vinz and C W Truesdale (eds) 1996 *The Party Train: A collection of North American prose poetry*, Minneapolis: New Rivers Press

Atherton, C and P Hetherington 2016 'Like a porcupine or hedgehog?: The prose poem as post-Romantic fragment', *Creative Approaches to Research*, vol. 9 No. 1, 2016, 19-38

Bray, Patrick M 2014 'Prose Constructions: Nerval, Baudelaire, and the Louvre' *L'Esprit Créateur* (54: 2) [Summer 2014], (http://0-literature.proquest.com.fama.us.es/contents/abl_toc/EspritCreateur/20140701.jsp) 115-126

Bradshaw, Michael 2007 'Hedgehog Theory: How to read a Romantic fragment poem,' *Literature Compass* 5:1, 73-89

Brophy, Kevin 2002 'The Prose Poem: A short history, a brief reflection and a dose of the real thing', *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, Vol 6, No 1, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april02/brophy.htm> (accessed 29 February 2016)

Brown, Andy 2012 'The Emergent Prose Poem', in *A Companion to Poetic Genre*, ed Erik Martiny, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 318-29

Coombs, Katherine 2009 "'A Kind of Gentle Painting": Limning in 16th-century England', in Kim Sloan (ed), *European Visions: American voices*, British Museum Research Publication 172, London: British Museum, 77-84, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/3-Coombs-A%20kind%20of%20gentle%20painting.pdf> (accessed 25 March 2016)

Costello, Moya 2002 'Letter to the Editor', *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, Vol 6, No, 2, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct02/letters.htm> (accessed Feb 9, 2016)

Costello, Moya 1999 "'The Fetishized Fragment"? Nah! "Flow Sucks"!', *Redoubt* 28,112-119

Davis, Lydia 2004 'Form as Response to Doubt', in Mary Burger, Robert Glück, Camille Roy, Gail Scott (eds), *Biting the Error: Form as a response to narrative*, Toronto: Coach House Books

Delville, Michel 1998 *The American Prose Poem: Poetic form and the boundaries of genre*, Grenville FL: University Press of Florida

Delville, Michel 1998 'Review of Stephen Fredman's *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*', *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, vol 7 (1998): 1 <http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1525&context=prosepoem> (accessed 30 May 2015)

Eliot, TS 1968 *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, London: Faber and Faber

- Eliot TS 1977 'Preface', in St John Perse, *Anabasis*, London: Faber and Faber, 9-12
- Eliot, TS 1991 *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press
- Etter, Carrie 2016 'The day marked by the brevity of its light', from the *Prose Poetry Project*, Canberra: International Poetry Studies Institute
- Fredman, Stephen 1990 *Poet's Prose: The crisis in American verse*, 2nd ed, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Geczy, Adam 2001 'Between Virtue and Innocence: In defence of prose poetry', *Cordite Review*, Feb, 2001, <http://cordite.org.au/essays/between-virtue-and-innocence/3/> (accessed 29 February 2016)
- Hetherington, Paul and Cassandra Atherton 2015 "'Unconscionable Mystification"?: Rooms, spaces and the prose poem', *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 265-81, DOI: 10.1080/14790726.2015.1047856 (accessed 15 July 2015)
- Innes, Randy Norman 2008 *On the Limits of the Work of Art: The fragment in visual culture*, PhD thesis, Rochester NY: University of Rochester
- Jakobson, Roman 2002 'The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles', in René Dirven and Ralf Pörings (eds), *Metaphor and Metonymy in Comparison and Contrast*, Berlin: Mouton D Gruyter, 41-48
- Jones, P. Mansell 1968 *The Background of Modern French Poetry: Essays and interviews*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kramer, Richard 1997 'The Hedgehog: Of fragments finished and unfinished', *19th Century Music*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 134-148
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Phillipe and Jean-Luc Nancy 1988 *The Literary Absolute: The theory of literature in German Romanticism*, transl Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press
- Levinson, Marjorie 1986 *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A critique of a form*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Littlemore, Jeannette 2015 *Metonymy: Hidden shortcuts in language, thought and communication*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- McFarland, Thomas 1981 *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, the modalities of fragmentation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Mirriam-Webster Dictionary* online, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary> (accessed 7 March 2016)
- Monroe, Jonathan 1987 *A Poverty of Objects: The prose poem and the politics of genre*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press
- Monte, Steven 2000 *Invisible Fences: Prose poetry as a genre in French and American literature*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press

Prose Poetry Project 2014-16 International Poetry Studies Institute, ACT: The University of Canberra

Radden, Günter and Zoltán Kövecses 1999 'Towards a Theory of Metonymy', in Kaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden (eds), *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 17-59

Richards, Marvin 1998 *Without Rhyme Or Reason: Gaspard de la Nuit and the dialectic of the prose poem*, Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses

Robinson, Roger 2011 *1 Minute Lecture: On prose poems*, <http://rogerrobinsononline.com/1-minute-lecture-on-prose-poems/> (accessed 15 March, 2016)

Rosen, Charles 1995 *Romantic Generation*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Santilli, Nikki 2002 *Such Rare Citings: The prose poem in English literature*, Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses

Schlegel, Friedrich 1971 *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, transl Peter Firchow, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Shakespeare, William 1997 *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Project Gutenberg, <https://archive.org/stream/shakespearesonn01041gut/wssnt10.txt> (accessed 25 March 2016)

Shapcott, Thomas 2002 'Letter to the Editor', *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, Vol 6, No 2, 2002, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct02/letters.htm> (accessed 9 February 2016)

Smith, Barbara Herrnstein 1968 *Poetic Closure: A study of how poems end*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Webb Jen 2016 'He died when I was away from home', from the *Prose Poetry Project*, Canberra: International Poetry Studies Institute

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Cassandra Atherton is an award-winning writer, academic and critic. She has been awarded a Harvard Visiting Scholar's position from August 2015–September 2016 and was a Visiting Fellow at Sophia University, Tokyo in 2014. She has published eight books (with two more in progress) and over the last three years has been invited to edit six special editions of leading refereed journals. She is the successful recipient of more than 15 national and international grants and teaching awards. Her most recent books of prose poetry are *Trace* (Finlay Lloyd) and *Exhumed* (Grand Parade).

Professor Paul Hetherington is Head of the International Poetry Studies Institute (IPSI) at the University of Canberra. He edited the final three volumes of the National Library of Australia's authoritative four-volume edition of the diaries of the artist Donald Friend. He has published ten full-length collections of poetry, including the verse novel, *Blood and Old Belief* and the recently released *Burnt Umber*. He won the 2014 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards (poetry); was a finalist in the 2014 international *Aesthetica* Creative Writing Competition; and was shortlisted for the 2016 Newcastle Poetry

Prize and the 2013 Montreal International Poetry Prize. In 2015–16 he undertook an Australia Council for the Arts Literature Board Residency at the BR Whiting Studio in Rome.