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Quotidian Metageographies: Prose Poems as Non-Fiction Postcards

Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington

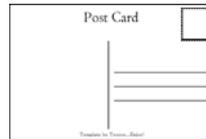
1. Introduction

The prose poem is a flexible vehicle that is often used, in a range of guises, to drive explorations and excavations of the quotidian. David Lehman acknowledges this when he states, 'The prose poem is, you might say, poetry that disguises its true nature. In the prose poem, the poet can appropriate such unlikely models as the newspaper article, the memo, the list, the parable, the speech, the dialogue' (2008, 13). The postcard is another model to which the prose poem lays claim. What one might call the prose poem postcard embraces and communicates the experience of travel, relying on 'the interaction of images and text to reveal an intimate "confessional style" narrative ... and is restricted to approximately the size of a postcard' (Hughes, 2014, 198). The rectilinearity of the postcard and its framed personal message mimic the ubiquitous shape of the prose poem, perhaps demonstrating that the postcard itself often travels in mysterious ways: not only as a missive journeying from writer to reader but as a container for what is insistently evocative and suggestive of only partly expressed meanings. Prose poetry travels as it transforms what might otherwise be clichéd, or even kitsch, postcard images into new and personalised interpretations of space.

In this way, an idealised view of the traveller's space can be reinvented by the reader in the same way that the western literary tradition's bias against the mundane and ordinary (Rainey et al 2013) can be overturned – by celebrating the quotidian as 'a rejuvenating "over and over" of renewed mornings' (2009: 1). Thus the stock images on postcards are able to be transformed into rectangular moments of wonder which then, in lemniscate fashion, may enliven new prose poems and ways of being:

creative work explores the notion that the consideration of familiar things may provide various conduits into lateral ways of knowing not only

things, but also ourselves and others; of discovering new veins of thought; and of identifying significances that we “know” but have been unable to otherwise articulate. (Hetherington 2015)



2. Poetry and place

An emphasis on place, the quotidian and self-discovery in poetry is not new. William Cowper and Olney, Alexander Pope’s Windsor or Twickenham, Charles Cotton in Derbyshire, William Wordsworth and the Lake poets, John Clare at Helpston and Thomas Hardy’s Wessex are all examples of poets connecting with the self-actualising qualities of place. In Walt Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’ the narrator walks the reader through his America, presenting people from all echelons of society: prostitute, opium-eater, conductor, clean-hair’d Yankee girl and President, stating that ‘of these one and all I weave the song of myself’ (1892). The personal point of view of the narrator as ‘everyman’ is prioritised in his wandering snapshot of a nation. This is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* where he states:

incidents and situations from common life ... related or described ... in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect ... (n.p.)

Similarly, TS Eliot remarked in 1945 that ‘A poet must take as his material his own language as it is actually spoken around him’ (19), and in his essay ‘The Music of Poetry’ (1969) he states: the ‘law of poetry must not stray too far from the ordinary everyday language which we use and hear ... it cannot afford to lose its contact with the changing language of common intercourse’ (13).

Prose poetry is a form that embraces 'ordinary language'. This is because, as Robert Alexander argues, when a reader approaches a prose poem, the right and left justified form prepares them for the paragraph, rather than the stanza:

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).

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. In this way, the prose poem is often considered more 'democratic' (Hart, 99) than lyric poetry because of its use of 'ordinary language' to explore a quotidian sense of *genius loci*. Notwithstanding its origins in Roman religion, this Latin phrase has become increasingly secularised to mean 'the special atmosphere of a particular place' (Samyn, 2011, n.p). Lawrence Durrell writes, 'tasting the wines, cheeses and characters of the different countries, you begin to realize that the important determinant of culture is after all – the spirit of place' (1969: 240). In this way, when prose poetry appeals to *genius loci* it can be transformative: a clichéd postcard becomes a homage to peripeteia. The place does not have to be idyllic, but as Henry James points out, it should transmute into something wondrous for the writer: London 'is not a pleasant place. It is not agreeable or cheerful or easy or exempt from reproach. It is only magnificent' (204).



3. Prose poetry and metageography

The spaces of travel are often bounded more by the arbitrary spaces of wanderlust, than they are by the geometrical divisions or coordinates of land. In

this way, prose poetry can be read as an appeal to the meta-geographical. Martin W. Lewis has defined metageography as:

the relatively unexamined and often taken-for-granted spatial frameworks through which knowledge is organized within all fields of the social sciences and humanities ... Put differently, geographical concepts become 'metageographical' concepts to the extent that they lose their specific spatial coordinates and become imbued with extraneous conceptual baggage.' (2010)

Prose poetry explores these appurtenances of place, following a metageography of what Sheila Hones (2014) identifies as "'container space" (that regards space as a kind of box within which action happens)' (36). The prose poetry box or 'container space' holds impressions and commonalities in its parameters. In this way, within it there are no geographical frameworks such as 'continents'; but rather a reservoir of the quintessence of place. The borders shift from political structures demarcating territory, to the four invisible lines framing the prose poem form, prioritising a 'relational view, which understands space as being constituted and given meaning through human and nonhuman practices and interactions' (76). Far from simplifying the world, metageographical constructs validate the complexities of the personal and quotidian by giving them prominence. Indeed, the postcard shape of prose poetry is a space wherein common ideologies can be juxtaposed with the poet's individual experiences of place and travel. As descriptions or evocations of place are filtered through personal experience and impressions, so 'picture postcard' visions are transformed by the prose poet's imaginings in ways that emphasise the metageographical capabilities of the prose poem. Where the postcard advertises its destination and the writing on the back personalises the experience of travel, the prose poem's expressions make new and metageographical locations.

While the postcard may seem like a redundant form of communication or even an archaism of yesteryear, many scholars have argued that the postcard retains its functionality – but perhaps as a memory of travel rather than an enticement sent to others:

Even today, the postcard remains a staple of the gift shop, despite people being able to tweet their holiday photos or update Facebook from the beach. Maybe the cards are now being bought simply as personal souvenirs ... A recording rather than a broadcast. (Ward 143)

Therefore, 'the postcard [is] like a time capsule' (Ward, 138) and the prose poem may equally be read as a memory of the prose poet's time in a particular place with metageographical significances. It can act as a time machine back to a particular moment of travel; and as a way of travelling through moments of being; nothing less than complex snapshot of lived experience.



4. Personal geographies: prose poetry from Rome and Boston

In 2015, one of us (Paul) was on a writing residency at the BR Whiting Studio in Rome awarded by the Australia Council of the Arts and the other (Cassandra) was a Visiting Scholar at Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Jetlagged and connecting on email at strange times, we began to write prose poems about our experiences of these places – for ourselves and for the University of Canberra's International Poetry Studies Institute's Prose Poetry Project, to which we both contribute. The time difference between Rome and Boston is six hours and they are a day behind AEST. We were finding our equilibrium and simultaneously confronting our preconceived expectations of our new writing spaces. We resisted the clichés of place by writing prose poems that were metageographical in their textured examinations of life somewhere other than home. An important part of the writing process was celebrating the repetition of the quotidian as rejuvenating, within these spaces, as many of our working days traversed similar, if geographically separate, ground.

Paul's prose poem (below) catalogues Rome in a brief snapshot referencing history and memory. It is metageographical in the way that the flea market is a relatively universal term for street vending and the reader is invited to take a walk, metaphorically, to peruse the items on sale: 'pans, sunglasses, myriad jewels ... shells, starfish, albums'. They are all – to some degree – useless items, perhaps even 'litter'. However, part of their hidden value lies in their ability to reference the past. They are disparate pieces of historical art or culture, kindling memories of an earlier time. In this prose poem, such items initially appear lifeless: 'Etruscan artefacts are dusted with twenty-five centuries', the 'dried starfishes are stiffly real' and the items of bric-a-brac are only 'facsimiles of quality'. Similarly, the live potted pomegranate becomes still life in the rendering of 'its small fruit [that] might have been painted.' However, the items are resurrected in the prose poem through personal reflection, referenced by the diaries 'await[ing] privacies' and the simile of 'the crowd press[ing] like memory'. Indeed, the repetition of the word 'press' in the evocation of items 'inhabit[ing] our past like the impress of wandering hands' and through the recollection of being 'pressed close on a similar carpet', demonstrates the intersections of past, present and future, which is felt as a force.

While the trip to the flea market does not culminate in any purchases because 'We do not know what we look for and fail to find it', the melding of time is clearly registered. Towards the end, the narrator remembers an 'identical lamp' to the one being caressed by a young couple. In this moment, these strangers' lives become enmeshed as the lamp triggers the past for the narrator and is carried into the future by the couple. The effect of listing the ephemera on display at the flea market is a crowdedness that forces the reader to engage with the quotidian. Similarly, the meandering comes to a standstill in the final three lines where the questions that occur coupled with the long vowel sounds in 'standing' and 'future' suggest the absorbing and puzzling nature of personal memories.



The flea market covers a longer walk than we manage. Flusters of wind lift tarpaulins and plastic sheets with the sound of broken applause. There are pans, sunglasses, myriad jewels—facsimiles of quality everywhere. The shells and dried starfishes are stiffly real. Small diaries await privacies. Etruscan artefacts are dusted with twenty-five centuries. A young woman carries a potted pomegranate. Its small fruit might have been painted. A cache of strange owls peers without blinking. We do not know what we look for and fail to find it. Daylight is a litter of too many colours and the crowd presses like memory—yes, we think, we have listened to those albums. They inhabit our past like the impress of wandering hands. Who pressed us close on a similar carpet? Who sent us an identical lamp? We lay under its light and watched three years pass. A young couple fingers its petalled shapes. We are standing in their future.

Paul Hetherington, 14-Sep-2015 01:38 AM

The prose poem below details a day in Boston and is in loose dialogue with Paul's snapshot of Rome. A moment in a pharmacy chain is also presented as a list of items that are relatively commonplace and unremarkable: 'painkillers, cookies, makeup, water and chocolate'. While 'Little Italy' references the North End in Boston where Italian immigrants have settled, it connects metageographically with Paul's prose poem set in Rome and parodies geographical divisions through its reference to New York and 'loyal[ty] shopping' in CVS and Duane Reade. However, this piece has less emphasis on meandering and memories and a more directed approach to purchasing goods for future use. In Paul's work the narrator leaves the flea market without buying anything; the narrator in Cassandra's prose poem leaves with both too much and not enough. The quotidian is invested with restorative powers because painkillers and items of food and drink are essential to a productive working life in this space. It ends on a wry note, with the stereotypical words of a cashier, 'Will that be all?' This could be read as sarcastic, given the excessive number of tablets the narrator is purchasing. It may also be questioning life viewed through the lens of a shopping list and inflected through purchases in a pharmacy. The question could be read as: 'Are these superficialities all you want in life?'



I hang out at CVS pharmacy in Boston. I like the CVS homebrand added strength painkillers with acetaminophen, aspirin and caffeine. I fill my basket with boxes of two hundred and seventy five coated tablets. A homeless man with a Starbucks paper cup opens the door for me to the CVS on Copley Square. I empty my purse into his cup and laugh when his cell phone rings and he answers it. It's an iPhone 6. I go up and down every aisle in the CVS so I don't miss anything. I like it more than Duane Reade in New York. I am a loyal shopper. Like all those people in Little Italy. I love CVS. I buy Chips A'Hoy cookies and a six pack of orange flavoured water. Sometimes I buy make up. Or Russell Stover Red Velvet Cake truffles. The medicine is up the escalator. Last time I bought seventeen boxes of tablets and the cashier asked, 'Will that be all?'

Cassandra Atherton, 14-Sep-2015 05:38 PM

Two further, playful prose poems are dialogic in their composition on the same day in December, hours apart. The date stamps are Australian time as they were received by the Australian curator of the Prose Poetry Project, but they were composed in Rome and Boston. In Paul's piece, Death is personified as a bachelor drinking at the bar, Bir and Fud, in Rome; and in Cassandra's prose poem he is the opponent in a game of Frisbee in Harvard Yard. Death speaks to both narrators, illustrating in a self-reflexive moment, Paul's line, 'writers have always loved [Death].' Cassandra takes up the idea of Death as a game player – literally – with the Frisbee match and builds on the conclusion of her counterpart's prose poem by imagining Death trying to outwit all those with whom he comes in contact. In Paul's prose poem Death 'buys me a beer, promising it means nothing' and in Cassandra's, 'I tell him it's just a game. He promises he's just killing time'. This personification of Death and the implied Faustian pacts, make poetic capital out of a ubiquitous theme.



This evening Death sits at the bar of Bir and Fud in Rome. The Belgian stout is as smooth and dark as his conversation as he tells jokes about how disappointed he was that the Roman Empire collapsed - because the Romans had served his cause so well - but that everything actually got better after that. It feels like s blasphemy because I'm thinking of my dear friend, but I realise this is necessary talk, where sentiment meets Death's pragmatic face. He's distracted now, talking to a pretty young woman, and she has no idea what's coming. But neither do I - and I know who he is. He's strangely beguiling with his marvellous literary knowledge ("writers have always loved me") and his interest in historical epochs. There's nothing he doesn't have an opinion about, which is a kind of death in itself. But I keep listening and he buys me a beer, promising it means nothing.

Paul Hetherington, 10-Dec-2015 04:20 AM



Death and I are playing frisbee in Harvard Yard. He's bored with chess and cards, I'm in between classes and it seems like the only way to stop him playing the fiddle again. He puts on his yellow Nikes while I kick off my heels and tuck up my skirt. I tell him it's just a game. He promises he's just killing time.

Cassandra Atherton, 10-Dec-2015 10:26 PM

5. Conclusion

Sociologist Michael Mayerfeld Bell in *The Ghosts of Place* (1997), writes, 'A common feature of the experience of place is the sense of the presence of those who are not physically there - the genii loci' (813). We are now both back in Australian cities and in the same time zone, separated by only a short flight. Currently many of our prose poems are haunted by various metageographical

spaces and previous selves we imagine may still be there. Our prose poetry continues to travel in unexpected and transformative ways.

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