Like a Porcupine or Hedgehog?
The Prose Poem as Post-Romantic Fragment

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Abstract

Prose poems are frequently characterised as fragmentary or incomplete in the way that they gesture to a larger, often unnamed, frame of reference; present small, sometimes unfinished narratives which are implied to be parts of larger narrative structures; and are often characterised by considerable indeterminacy. In this respect, it may be argued that prose poetry traces part of its lineage back to Romantic fragment poems—indeed, at least as far back as James Macpherson’s Ossian “translations”. In the Romantic period, fragments were understood as reflecting the idea of the imperfectability of contemporary human existence, aided by the antiquarian attraction of many Romantic writers to the ruins and relics of the classical past and an associated preference for the evocation of notions of infinitude and boundlessness. This paper argues that prose poems gesture to this Romantic genealogy in their concern with openness and diversity, and the reshaping of literary-aesthetic boundaries to metonymically explore incompleteness.

The paper takes its name from Friedrich Schlegel’s Igel. Schlegel famously described the fragment as an Igel, or hedgehog, because of its autonomy and isolation from the wider world. One way of understanding the renaissance of the prose poem in the last 35 years, is to apply the Schlegelian metaphor of a hedgehog to contemporary prose poems in order to argue that this hybrid genre remains in dialogue with the
fragmented literary works of the past. This paper argues that as prose poetry continues to explore fissured identity and plurality in a postmodern society, it owes a significant debt to postmodernism’s Romantic and fragmented inheritance.

**Keywords:** prose poetry, Romantic fragment, postmodernism, whole, infinity, incomplete

### The Romantic Fragment and the Prose Poem

Many literary works throughout history have remained fragmentary or incomplete. However, it was only with the advent of the Romantic movement that the notion of the fragment as a completed—or, at least, concluded—work became a dominant literary and philosophical idea. This was true in different centres of Romanticism, including the United Kingdom and Germany, despite significant variations in how Romanticism manifested itself in different places:

German Romanticism developed a program for literature and culture that aimed at all fields of art, science, and society, while English Romanticism remained a predominantly literary movement, more empirical and less philosophical than was the case in Germany. (Davies 2014: 230)

The extent of differences between different Romanticisms is important but, as Christopher Bode notes, it should not obscure connections between various Romantic enterprises in different countries:

All this variety need not worry us if we reconceptualize European Romanticism as a set of responses, highly differentiated and at times downright contradictory, to a historically specific challenge: the challenge of the ever-accelerating modernization of European society. (2005: 127; emphasis original)

One of these connections is the production by nineteenth-century Romantic writers in both Germany and the United Kingdom of literary and philosophical fragments, and the related motives behind at least some of their respective enterprises. For example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Friedrich Schlegel, both critical of Immanuel Kant’s ideas, “experimented with the form of philosophy, composing fragments usually conceived as ‘Bruchstücke’, or parts broken off from a projected whole” (Vigus 2011: 8).

More generally, Michael Bradshaw contends that “Many Romantic writers …[saw] some sort of cachet in stopping short of an ending, almost as if a proper determined ending were in some sense vulgar” (2007: 74). There were larger matters at stake, too. Romantic writers and thinkers everywhere referenced a classical past that was literally in ruins and which became a model for the imperfectability of contemporary human existence. In doing so, they joined antiquarian interests
with larger aesthetic, literary and philosophical concerns. Kelly Eileen Battles observes that “[t]he attraction to ruins and other material fragments is central to the Romantic project … the antiquarian impulse involves the expansion of the concept of fragmentation to include not only materiality (ruins, artifacts, etc.), but also fragmented narrative forms and the privileging of the historical anecdote to the exclusion of linear grand narratives” (2008: 67). Along with Coleridge and Schlegel, the concept of fragmentation also influenced poets as diverse as Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and Byron, and in Germany was important to Novalis’s work.

William Vaughan, simultaneously referencing the work of the English painter William Turner, Schlegel and Coleridge comments that “To some extent in self-conscious opposition to Classicism, Romanticism represented itself as the art of incompleteness made necessary by the ineffable and eternally evolving processes of the universe” (1999: 44). Isaiah Berlin characterises these developments as:

a new and restless spirit, seeking violently to burst through old and cramping forms, a nervous preoccupation with perpetually changing inner states of consciousness, a longing for the unbounded and the indefinable, for perpetual movement and change, an effort to return to the forgotten sources of life, a passionate effort at self-assertion both individual and collective, a search after means of expressing an unappeasable yearning for unattainable goals. (2003: 92)

Such ideas have been carried forward into the 21st century even though they have, along the way, suffered the sea-changes of Modernism and postmodernism. Fragmented forms, condensed and incomplete yet gesturing at large and sometimes ineffable ideas, have influenced almost all forms of literary production so that many contemporary literary novels, for example, do not aim to “complete” their narratives, and many contemporary poems are lyric, impressionistic and open in form, eschewing closure.

The modern prose poem is a particular case in point, written in prose but employing many of the techniques of the modern lyric poem. In this way it arguably reveals a Romantic legacy. Marvin Richards is one of a group of contemporary scholars, including Nikki Santilli, Jonathan Monroe (1987: 1), Stephen Fredman (1990: 1) and Michel Delville, who explicitly connect prose poetry to the Romantic fragment, yet to date nobody has discussed this connection in any great detail and there is no scholarship that we are aware of that presents analyses of 21st-century prose poetry in these terms. The observations of critics are nevertheless suggestive. Delville argues that prose poetry is, “[a]t once whole and standing alone … the fragment-ruin of prose poetry is also incomplete and stand[s] for a greater whole” (1998: 15), and Santilli extends this argument by drawing attention to the prose poem’s quest to represent the wholeness of human experience in a fragmented form:
The Romantic fragment provides the ideological basis for the prose poem form. Its concern with the nature of truth; a desire to represent totality as the only possible approximation to this Idea and the fragmentary way in which this is achieved; the principles guiding the parameters of the form and the absence of the work itself are all common properties of both types of composition. However, it is the character of both forms to preface a (missing) work that ensures their continuing marginal status in literature history. (2002: 39)

We aim to develop such critical insights and to explore how suitable the idea of the Romantic fragment is to an understanding of a number of prose poems produced in the last two years. We are particularly interested in the way prose poems gesture to the Romantic fragment in their concern with openness and diversity, and the reshaping of literary-aesthetic boundaries to metonymically explore incompleteness.

**The Importance of the Romantic Fragment**

Numerous works from the Romantic period explore or embody fragmentation. A well-known passage from Coleridge’s letter to John Thelwall of 16 October 1797 sums up many currents of the late 18th- and early 19th-century zeitgeist:

I can at times feel strongly the beauties, you describe, in themselves & for themselves—but more frequently all things appear little—all the knowledge, that can be acquired, child’s play—the universe itself—what but an immense heap of little things?—I can contemplate nothing but parts, & parts are all little—!—My mind feels as if it aches to behold & know something great—something one & indivisible and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty!—But in this faith all things counterfeit infinity! (1966: 349)

Thomas McFarland, following Fritz Strich, convincingly argues that such a preoccupation with infinity was characteristic of Romantic writers. He also writes that they found themselves confronting “the attendant paradox whereby the perception of parts and fragments implies the hypothetical wholeness of infinity, but the impossibility of grasping that entity” (1981: 28-9). In discussing such matters, McFarland emphasises “[i]ncompletion, fragmentation, and ruin” that, he asserts, “not only receive a special emphasis in Romanticism but also in a certain perspective seem actually to define that phenomenon” (7).

This last point draws attention to the sense of longing that pervaded Romanticism; the notion that something important had been lost from the world that remained forever out of reach. This was not simply Coleridge’s quest for “beauties” and “the great” – urgent as that may have been – but it was also an awareness of a more general absence and disjuncture; the idea that coherence was unachievable.
This awareness may have been expressed differently by different writers—one need only think of the powerfully divergent preoccupations of Blake, Wordsworth and Byron—but tropes of fragmentation haunt almost all of the major works of the Romantic period. Michael O’Brien argues that this is because:

Theory and reality became dissonant, young men could no longer read Gibbons or Condorcet without a sense of disjuncture … Romanticism … appealed to a generation who felt the immediate past unnourishing, the present unreliable, the future unpredictable. (1993: 42)

The Romantic fragment embodies this sense of disjuncture and Coleridge famously left a variety of important poems as fragments, including “Kubla Khan”—blaming the intervention of “a person on business from Porlock” (1860: 127) for the intractability of his poetic material. His gesture was characteristic of the period in general, and many works by Shelley, Wordsworth and Keats are also incomplete. Further, there was an impetus to more closely connect poetry to prose. Jeffrey C. Robinson makes the point that Wordsworth’s “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” (1800) “argues for the near identity of poetry and prose [in] driving to recover and stimulate through poetry an essential human spirit available to all persons” (2012: 1019). The democratisation of literature had begun, accompanied by an urge to relate poetry more directly to the quotidian.

Keats, with his strong interest in writers such as Spenser and Shakespeare, was less concerned than Wordsworth with “all persons” but he, too, was aware that the old edifices were no longer easily adaptable to contemporary literature, and that fragmentation was one result. His poems “Hyperion” and “The Fall of Hyperion” have been read as works whose incompleteness helps to define them and their poetic character. Categorised as a “dependent” fragment by Marjorie Levinson, and as an “exercise in the poet’s career” (1986: 50), such works emphasise absence as powerfully as they register presence; or, to put this differently, in registering presence that implies significant absence and indeterminacy, they appear to assert that complete edifices are able only to be gestured at. Far from expressing narrative failure, Keats’ choice to leave “Hyperion” as a fragment has been interpreted as demonstrating maturity and an understanding of “an absence of meaning at the heart of things” (186).

In Shelley’s case, McFarland has remarked that one can simply open the Oxford edition of Shelley’s poetical works (one could do the same with the new Penguin edition of Wordsworth’s poems), and in the table of contents observe such titles as “Prince Athanase. A Fragment”; “Fragment: Home”; “Fragment of a Ghost Story”; “Fragment: To One Singing”; “A Fragment: To Music”; “Another Fragment to Music”. (1981: 25)
When McFarland writes that “Shelley’s fragmentariness is only one illustration of the intensified occurrence of diasparactive forms in the Romantic era” (25); and as he comments that “the Elgin marbles—those supreme testimonies to significance within ruin—serve as a kind of objective correlative for the culture and history of the epoch” (25), so he endorses and expands upon Schlegel’s 24th Athenaeum Fragment, written in 1798: “Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written” (1971: 164).

In the Romantic period, the allure of ruins and relics assisted in the acceptance of the literary fragment as a literary mode in its own right—and just as archaeological fragments are inextricably linked with the knowledge that they were originally part of a whole, so literary fragments gesture at a whole that is not fully realised in the work itself. Where infinity is concerned fragments make finite and incomplete gestures at an unencompassable totality. D.F. Rauber comments that:

> The great formal problem of the romantic poet can be stated briefly as the devising of means to embody the infinite in a finite, discrete, and sequential medium … the fragment constitutes a perfect formal solution to the problem … it matches romantic ideals and tone as fully and completely as the closed couplet matches the ideals of eighteenth-century neoclassicism. (2013: 214-15)

The German poet and philosopher Novalis (1772–1801) addresses these issues in his Logological Fragments—texts that are simultaneously philosophical and prose-poetical in being highly suggestive and allusive, and dependent as much upon the presentation and combination of sometimes disparate ideas as on the development of a discursive argument or extended narrative structure:

> Only what is incomplete can be comprehended—can take us further. What is complete is only enjoyed. If we want to comprehend nature we must postulate it as incomplete, to reach an unknown variable in this way. All determination is relative. (1997: 65)

Novalis also states:

> As one progresses so much becomes dispensable—much appears in a different light … That which is imperfect appears most tolerable as a fragment—and thus this form of communication is to be recommended above that which as a whole is not yet finished. (1997: 81)

This is to say that while the incomplete is comprehensible, the complete or the perfected resists understanding; and that the imperfect and fragmentary, in its incomplete yet comprehensible gesture at an unachievable perfectibility, is preferable to an unfinished and unsettled whole. In one of his Critical Fragments Schlegel went so far as to suggest that “many a work of art whose coherence is never
questioned is … not a complete work but a fragment, or one or more fragments” (1971: 155).

It is worth remembering that the idea that the fragment could, in a paradoxical way, be complete and self-sufficient contradicted an assumption that had prevailed until the Romantic period across all main literary genres, including poetry—that works of literature, and other works of art, should be formally completed. In the English Renaissance, for example, this urge towards completion saw a work such as Christopher Marlowe’s Hero and Leander “finished” by George Chapman—and finished again, although less impressively, by Henry Petowe. Although many literary works from the period, and from earlier periods, remained unfinished—because of their authors’ deaths or because they grew sick of their work; and Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales and Spenser’s The Faerie Queene are famous examples—Spenser’s “Amoretti 33” indicates that this was once something to regret rather than celebrate. The sonnet begins:

GREAT wrong I doe, I can it not deny,  
to that most sacred Empresse my dear dred,  
not finishing her Queene of faery,  
that mote enlarge her liuing prayses dead: (1996: n.p.)

The Augustans, too, famously celebrated a neo-classical idea of harmony and resolution, perhaps most tellingly expressed in Alexander Pope’s invocation of the great chain of being—a chain that has aesthetic as well as religious, social and political implications: “And if each system in gradation roll / Alike essential to th’ amazing whole” (1963: 513).

Many Romantics remained cognisant of the “amazing whole” referred to by Pope but unlike Pope they had little confidence that their works might in any way fully encompass such a thing. Coleridge’s lament in the letter quoted above, that he “can contemplate nothing but parts”, reflects a general sense that this “whole” was not only out of reach, but that literary works might only gesture at it. In this context, the fragment symbolises the limitations of human apprehension and the relative inaccessibility of the sublime and infinite. In addition to this, in the spirit of Novalis’s fragments, the imperfect was elevated above the perfect; and the broken and incomplete was elevated, paradoxically, to the status of a whole.

Ossian’s Prose-Poetical Fragments

As writers from the Romantic period self-consciously and concertedly produced a great many fragments, they had a highly influential literary model that for a considerable period was almost all-pervasive in literary communities throughout Europe. This model was written in English and subsequently widely translated. These were the works by the influential proto-Romantic writer, James Macpher-
son (1736–1796) collected under the title *Ossian*, that significantly influenced Goethe, Byron, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth and numerous others, including European painters.

Macpherson concocted his “translations” of *Ossian* from putative fragments of Scots Gaelic poetry, thus providing Romanticism with one of its most influential models for combining antiquarian interests with a new fragmentary poetics. Macpherson's first edition of 1760, which consisted of ground-breaking poetic prose, was tantalisingly entitled *Fragments of ancient poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Gaelic or Erse language*. Even later, after Macpherson expanded *Ossian* to include, among other works, his epic about Fingal, this was, like the rest, claimed to be a fragment of a largely lost literary culture. Macpherson writes:

> after a peregrination of six months, the translator collected from tradition, and some manuscripts, all the poems in the following collection, and some more still in his hands, though rendered less complete by the ravages of time … excepting the present poem, those pieces are in a great measure lost, and there only remain a few fragments of them in the hands of the translator. (1783: xxiv-xxv)

Macpherson’s work evoked a heroic past that many people wished to believe in, and it did so in sensuous, often emotive, relatively direct poetic prose. John J. Dunn observes:

> That Macpherson chose to call his poems “fragments” is indicative of another quality that made them unusual in their day. The poems have a spontaneity that is suggested by the fact that the poets seem to be creating their songs as the direct reflection of an emotional experience. In contrast to the image of the poet as the orderer, the craftsman, the poets of the *Fragments* have a kind of artlessness (to us a very studied one, to be sure) that gave them an aura of sincerity and honesty. (2005: n.p.)

Macpherson’s “translations” constitute a radical experiment in the prosody and subject matter of English-language poetry that helped to change the course of English literature, no matter how artificial and contrived much of the writing in *Ossian* seems today. In 1847 Asa Humphrey provides a short quotation from *Ossian*—“The music of Carryl, was, like the memory of joys that are past, pleasant and mournful to the soul”—and writes that

> [t]his is a species of verse, unlike to all others: it being without form, like other poems, without metre, and without order in the arrangement of its feet, or its numbers; and may, perhaps, not properly be ranked, as one of the Orders of English verse (27).
E.H.W. Meyerstein adds that “Macpherson can, without extravagance, be regarded as the main originator (after the translators of the Authorized Version) of what’s known as ‘free verse’” (1948: 96) and, indeed, it is possible to go further. It is arguable that Ossian inaugurated prose poetry in English, especially because the shorter Ossian “fragments” were generally the most popular and influential parts of the work—Dafydd R Moore notes that “the Fragments of Ancient Poetry were in many quarters the most highly regarded of Macpherson’s productions” (2003: 48). While English-language poets mainly continued to write in metre until the end of the 19th century—when Oscar Wilde, partly influenced by French models, attempted to revive prose poetry in English—the example of Ossian had opened up the possibility that English poetry might eschew metre and find ways of speaking “unlike to all others”.

**Schlegel and a Closed Form Resisting Closure**

The Romantic fragment’s refusal to be pinned down, its resistance to closure and its “inherent multiplicity” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1978: 42-3) in the way that it is always itself and yet more than itself, reinforces the sense of expansiveness it so often conveys. Schlegel celebrates such expansiveness, and Romantic poetry’s diversity more generally, in his manifesto of Romantic poetics:

> Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. Its aim isn’t merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical … Other kinds of poetry are finished and are now capable of being fully analyzed. The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize its ideal. (Schlegel 1971: 175)

In this celebrated aphorism, Schlegel reintegrates poetry and prose as a fusing of disciplines. Most significantly, he attempts to unite philosophy and poetry. Schlegel asserts that while poetry is about life, it simultaneously extends beyond knowledge to embrace infinite progression and the Unknowable. He posits that Romantic poetry is inexhaustible, heterogeneous and, importantly, imperfect.

Schlegel’s celebrated definition of the Romantic fragment is much terser. A well-known translation reads:

> 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. (Schlegel 1971: 189)
Although the porcupine references writing in its quills, this fragment has been the subject of lively debate. On a first reading, Schlegel’s point about isolation appears to contradict his argument that Romantic poetry should be “lively and sociable”. Yet it is important to note here that the translation of “Igel”, which means “hedgehog” rather than porcupine, is essential to an understanding of Schlegel’s simile. Randy Norman Innes writes that:

a hedgehog’s spines, … cannot be discharged. A hedgehog rolls itself into a ball but does not attack; its spines are … used to collect berries … and thus attaches itself to its environment. (2008: 143)

Michael Bradshaw also praises the “hedgehog analogy”:

[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)

Fragments may not present wholes, but in suggesting them—in presenting a part that metonymically stands in for the absent, completed work—they imply a whole. Further, they assert the sufficiency of knowing less rather than more. As fragments affirm the possibility of addressing the “more” they simultaneously characterise this “more” as unavailable and not fully knowable.

It is useful at this juncture to quote the opening of Schlegel’s Athenaeum Fragment 77 where he states, “A dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments” (1971: 170). In this light, the Romantic fragment may be imagined like a garlanded hedgehog, a paradoxical simile that captures considerable playfulness and wit. Individual fragments turn in on themselves, garland-like, and are simultaneously in dialogue with larger, “universal” issues. The fragment as hedgehog connects with the world even as it defends itself against it. Charles Rosen elaborates upon this circular structure in his observation that:

[t]he Romantic Fragment is … a closed structure, but its closure is a formality: it may 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 is torn apart or exploded by paradox, by ambiguity, just as the opening song of Dichterliebe is a closed, circular form in which beginning and end are unstable—implying a past before the song begins and a future after its final chord. (1998: 51)

Even Levinson’s taxonomy and phenomenology of Romantic fragment poems (or RFPs), that offers a “reading protocol” (1986: 49), does not secure the fragment’s shifting form. She contends that the “true fragment [such as Coleridge’s
“Christabel”] ... suggests both an antecedent and subsequent context of events of description”; that the “completed fragment [such as “Kubla Khan” has] ... an antithetical and remedial position”; that “the deliberate fragment [such as Byron’s “Fragment”] yields an experience of closure to the reader”; and that the “dependent fragment [“Hyperion” and “The Fall of Hyperion”] presents ... an episode or exercise in the poet’s career” (50). Her focus on the reader’s different responses to different kinds of fragments emphasises the boundless interpretations used in the act of reading to “fill in the blanks” (50). Rather than tightening the boundaries around each of the fragments, and challenging the ambiguity of the form, even in Levinson’s taxonomy the fragment continues to open out to challenge the reader’s subjectivity.

**The Prose Poem Understood as a Species of Romantic Fragment**

Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy claim decisively, “the fragment is the romantic genre par excellence”(1998: 40). In what reads as a version of the Schlegelian hedgehog, they characterise the Romantic fragment as combining “completion and incompletion within itself, or one may say ... it both completes and incompletes the dialectic of completion and incompletion” (1998: 50).

Although many Romantic fragments are not prose poems, such characterisations of the fragment might equally well be applied to a great deal of prose poetry. In a period when most poetry was written in metre, and a great deal of it was also in rhyme, it is interesting to consider how many Romantic fragments—especially those by philosopher-poets such as Schlegel and Novalis, not to mention the seminal works of Ossian—are written in poetic prose. To emphasise this point, Nikki Santilli’s characterisation of prose poetry might apply equally well to many Romantic fragments:

> a high level of intelligibility within a minimal number of sentences is, I believe, made possible by the absences it accommodates. As a fragment, the individual prose piece is an inevitably elliptical text and always stands in relation to a larger absent whole that represents the sum of its unselected contexts. I give the term “implied context” to this active space of signification. (2002: 22)

Prose poems, like the Romantic fragment, frequently make the implicit claim that understanding is often arrived at through the exclusion of information, and the restriction of the reader’s desire for narrative fulfilment or completion. Further, the fragmentary prose poem implicitly suggests that many experiences are themselves inherently fragmented and often incoherent, and studies in autobiographical memory over recent decades support such a conclusion. Martin Conway even argues that “there are no such things as autobiographical memories at least in the
sense of discrete, holistic, units in long-term memory” (1996: 67). In other words, we all tend to know the world through moments of fragmented and sometimes disjunctive apprehension.

**Contemporary Prose Poetry**

The International Poetry Studies Institute at the University of Canberra began the *Prose Poetry Project* in November 2014. This is an international practice-led research project in which participants, 21 in all, write and exchange prose poems by email. The rhythms of composition eddy and shift. Some of the works from the project have already been published in journals and in an anthology entitled *Seam* (2015: 1), *Pulse* (2016: 1)—and a book-length anthology is forthcoming.

Various prose poems from the project explicitly reference and explore Romantic and post-Romantic tropes. For example, Atherton’s “Red Hair” suggests that Keats’ lonely knight in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” may be inflected as a contemporary figure as well as representing a Romantic trope hearkening back to a lost medieval world:

You called me your La Belle Dame Sans Merci when I left you. Something to do with abandonment and my long red hair. I argued that I never fed you wild honey or manna. You were always free to leave. But you blamed me anyway. Something to do with my obsession with negative capability. It’s true that intuition and uncertainty drove me from you. You were too Coleridgean in your thoughts. But what you don’t know is that I met a man who whispered “with fruit that round the thatch-eves run”. I never could resist a man with a mellow voice quoting Keats. I want you to know that everything else is irrelevant. (*Prose Poetry Project*, n.p.)

This work makes use of an ironic voice and a contemporary sensibility to turn Keats’ famous poem on its head—this work is, as it were, narrated by the poem’s “lady in the meads” who says little in the original poem. As the prose poem playfully references Keats’ work it leaves the reader with a number of questions, such as whether it might be possible to re-read its famous source poem in this prose poem’s light; whether a “real” relationship is being referenced by the prose poem outside of its playful intertextuality; whether this prose poem is, after all, merely a literary artefact; and, finally, whether such issues matter and, if so, why?

A key general issue here is that fragmentation does not necessarily imply something that is merely lost or past, either for the Romantics or for contemporary writers. Prize-winning writer, Lydia Davis identifies her fragments as short stories to avoid an association with “something left behind”. She writes that:

[w]e can’t think of fragment without thinking of whole. The word fragment implies the word whole. A fragment would seem to be part of a whole, a broken-off
part of a whole. Does it also imply, as with other broken-off pieces, that enough of them would make a whole, or remake some original whole, some ideal whole? (2004: 36)

Davis identifies the fragment as metonymic. In the Romantic period this very quality—the fragment’s ability to house or implicate something greater than itself—was fundamental to the form’s boundlessness of suggestion and evocation. For contemporary prose poets the fragmentary nature of their work opens up similar possibilities, even if in many cases their sense of an infinite may be informed as much—or more—by science as by ideas of “beauty” or the Romantic sublime.

Jen Webb’s and Paul Munden’s prose poems prioritise gaps and spaces. In doing this they generate between imagination and reason points to a key Romantic tension translated into an idea of the postmodern sublime. Links of this kind between Romanticism and postmodernism have been remarked upon by a variety of writers. Emma Francis contends that “the deconstruction of the grand narratives of Romanticism which Postmodernism would seek to enact is already implicit or explicit in Romanticism itself” (1999: 70), a point that connects to Margueritte S. Murphy’s argument that, “[t]he prose poem is potentially or formally ‘postmodern’ according to Lyotard’s definition: ‘The unpresentable in presentation itself’” (1992: 170). This last phrase might equally well be applied to the Romantic fragment which searches, as Coleridge expressed it, to “behold & know something great” while confronting all the while “an immense heap of little things”.

Webb addresses circumstances connected to a fire in Cape Town, yet even this piece of information exists outside of the boundaries of her prose poem, which turns on an unnamed frame of reference. The opening line, “The fire beating down behind you” represents an appeal to the universality of the experience of fire as it invites the reader to fill in gaps in the work. She implies that this fire is impossible to present except through highly suggestive and incomplete verbal gestures. The narrator is affected by a multitude of what Lyotard would call unpresentables: the “heavens opening up” and seagulls “tak[ing] to the air”.

The fire beating down behind you, the mountain burning, you run, a flock of panicked geese, calling out for comfort. The sky is lovely, oranges and reds, but no one’s stopping to take pictures on a night like this. If you could pray you’d pray. Finger puppets on someone else’s hand. If you could pray, you’d imagine the great heavens opening up, wrapping you all in fibreglass. All is crackle and pop, all is cough. You pause at the foot of the mountain, at the mouth of the bay, the patient frightened geese milling around like you. The smell of sweat, the smell of smoke. Coughing. Phosphorescent water, sleepy waves. Seagulls yawn and stretch, the sky opens up for them, they take to the air. (Prose Poetry Project, n.p.)
Similarly, Paul Munden in his prose poem “Bellbird Hill” takes on a moment of the sublime with the bolt of unexplained lighting:

Bellbird Hill

Sheets of rain. Invisible bends. Windscreen wipers thump with your heart. Somewhere soon, the turning to the farm ... A thick bolt of lightning unzips the sky and there you are—the broken white line of the road between your shoulder blades. You listen to bird calls as you wait for the first tremor. Your cotton dress clings to your thighs. Tarmac ripples. Who was it that told on you? (*Prose Poetry Project*, n.p.)

Importantly, the protagonists are in the car—between places; between moments. There are many gaps which the reader tries to fill. Who are the people? Why are they going to the farm that is presumably on Bellbird Hill? And, importantly, what is the significance of the ambiguous last line: “Who was it that told on you?”, a line that implies a narrative that remains largely opaque to the reader. “Bellbird Hill” is a complete fragment that refuses traditional closure. There is the feeling in Munden’s poem of being left out of something; and of intruding uninvited on an intimate and puzzling moment. The work makes sense yet its implied narrative is irretrievably stalled.

Paul Hetherington’s prose poem, “Wave” has at its centre the unexpected juxtaposition of Katsushika Hokusai’s famous wave woodcut with Keats’ Grecian Urn. Indeed, the intertextual references result in the prose poem opening out to embrace art and poetry beyond the frame of the text. In this way, Hetherington’s work is independent but connects to a larger aesthetic frame. This is an illustration of the hedgehog turning itself inwards to show its independence, but using its spines to collect berries—connecting to the outside world even as it turns from it. “Wave” illustrates John Taylor’s point that prose poems,

have a predilection for the most puzzling kinds of associative thinking … short prose poems give an impression of wandering or leaping quite far, to unexpected endings that are often, in fact, not really endings. A contemporary Aesop? (2015: 1)

In Hetherington’s poem, in a surrealist, Murakami-esque moment, the wave is referenced in a metaphor concerning the foundations of the house where the floor, in a fable-like ending, becomes the wide sea:

Wave

There is a picture of a giant wave above the mantelpiece in the old bedroom. As frozen as those lovers on Keats’ urn. It came early last century in a packing crate, was framed badly, yet it lives in the room like the breath of fire. It has
been years since anyone stirred the grate; renovations have isolated the room, yet somewhere in the wainscotting time is marked by small noises. The house seems to lean towards this bedroom, as if a wave once shifted foundations. An intimate letter drifts on the wide sea of the floor (Prose Poetry Project, 2016: 96).

The reference to Keats is transformed in a contemporary setting where lovers are frozen like the wave in the woodcut and the imperfectability of existence is seen in the badly framed picture. The reader is left to question, “What is the intimate letter?” This prose poem demonstrates the way in which complete edifices are only able to be gestured at in this form. The personified house in “Wave” is in a ruined state, “leaning” on possibly “shifted foundations” and forever in a state of decline. Further, while there are gaps and spaces, similar to those in Webb’s and Munden’s prose poems, in Hetherington’s prose poem the gaps reference time passing and ultimately death, invoking the sublime.

The prose poem’s tightly boxed shape on the page makes any moment of liberation more exhilarating than an escape from the more open, lineated poetry. Gaps and spaces become more meaningful in a form—like the prose poetry paragraph—that turns on neither of these things. In prose poetry the line break is irrelevant. John Taylor argues, that the prose poem demonstrates the way in which the form allows for

an open field, a whimsical box of sorts … a space in which the poet’s mind can roam with little restraint, without worry of where words fall spatially on the page …. (2015: 1)

Conclusion

Since the 1980s, there has been a renewed interest in prose poetry, stemming, for example, from well-known poets such as Robert Bly publishing in this form, and from the advent of journals such as The Prose Poem: An International Journal in the 1990s, which provide publishing avenues dedicated to prose poetry. This momentum is not lost on critic Stephen Fredman who argues that “The prose poem, which has long been neglected and underrepresented in mainstream and experimental publications alike, is growing in popularity” (1990: 1). Interestingly, despite this, it is hard to think of writer in English who can exclusively be identified as a prose poet—even the American Russell Edson, strongly identified with the form, is also a short story writer and novelist. Nonetheless, the resurgence of prose poetry has resulted in a wide variety of literary journals now publishing this genre rather than simply pursuing the traditional fiction–lyric poetry–criticism triad.

As a result, while the Romantic fragment may initially have developed as a literary mode in response to Romantic ideals and preoccupations, in the last 35
years the fragment has been rejuvenated in the form of prose poetry. When, as mentioned, Emma Francis argues that “the deconstruction of the grand narratives of Romanticism … is already implicit or explicit in Romanticism itself” (70) it is possible to understand the Romantic fragment as having evolved into various further fragmentary forms and modes, including the prose poem. As Romanticism longed for what it could not have—the large, the infinite; a past that was gone—so it implicitly recognised, as does postmodernity, that coherence and monolithic wholes are frequently neither available to people nor necessarily desirable even if they are available. The contemporary prose poem is not the Romantic fragment, but is is a descendant of the form, carrying with it closely related preoccupations.

It is difficult to try and define the “prose poem”—it is a form that is as much about what it is not than what it is—and Delville has argued that “any attempt at a single, monolithic definition of the genre would be doomed to failure” (1998: 1). However, Delville’s use of the word “monolithic”, which is oppositional to the definition of “fragment”, is significant in the way that he points to the persistence of the Romantic idea of imperfectability in postmodern society.

David Lehmann, similarly struggles to provide a definition and shape for the prose poem:

What is a prose poem? The best short definition is almost tautological. The prose poem is a poem written in prose rather than verse. On the page it can look like a paragraph or fragmented short story, but it acts like a poem. It works in sentences rather than lines. With the one exception of the line break, it can make use of all the strategies and tactics of poetry. Just as free verse did away with meter and rhyme, the prose poem does away with the line as the unit of composition. It uses the means of prose towards the ends of poetry. (2003: 13)

This definition is intent upon pinning down the form of the prose poem by equating its parts to existing categories of prose or poetry. However, the prose poem’s subtleties demand more of a reading between these genres. Marvin Richards’ argument that “The prose poem, [i]s a site of continual hesitation between the poles of prose and poetry” is more useful (1998: 31). It is in these interstices between genres that the form of prose poetry dwells. It is best understood as transgressive and chameleonic. It transgresses the claustrophobic boundaries of form and is defined by a series of paradoxes. Santilli points to its resistance to categorisation in her argument that “[t]his is the paradox of prose poetry: completed prose pieces that nevertheless appear to resist closure by the very irreconcilable differences on which they are based” (2002: 37).

The contemporary prose poem remains illustrative of Schlegel’s hedgehog and garland metaphors—self-sufficient yet engaged with a wider world; turned in on itself yet acknowledging unstated beginnings and endings; autonomous, yet part of a continuing dialogue about fragmentary finiteness and infiniteness. The return
to the fragmented form in a post-Romantic context heralds a positive *apophrades*, or return of the dead. In discussing Schlegel and the Romantic fragment, Otabe Tanehisa writes that “The fragment can be termed “ripe … and … complete” because of its functions of intimation and suggestion” (2009: 61) and this description applies equally well to prose poetry. Like the *Ossian* works, prose poetry is inextricably connected to both prose and poetry, and houses ghosts of these two forms in its celebration of hybridity.

In discussing Friedrich Hölderlin’s (1770–1843) late poetry and fragments, Richard Sieburth writes:

> the modern imagination invents itself (and thereby Reinvents antiquity) out of the evidence of wreckage; it has only fragments to shore against its ruins. The eloquent debris of Palmyra or Herculaneum finds its philological equivalent in the miscellaneous scraps of Pindar that Hölderlin translated … to scrutinize a fragment is to move from the presence of a part to the absence of the whole, to seize upon the sign as witness of something that is forever elsewhere. (Hölderlin 1984: 33-4)

Sieburth refers to Hölderlin’s late drafts and fragments as “above all works in progress, neither beginnings nor endings but becomings” (34), which reminds one of Schlegel’s assertion that “The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected” (1971: 175). It may be that the prose poem is the current state of “becoming” of the kind of poetry instigated by the Romantic fragment. Prose poems are on the face of it well suited to postmodernism’s assumptions that grand—or, even, coherent—narratives are no longer valid; that multiple views and texts have replaced totalising visions; and that difference and diversity are hallmarks of a healthy, questioning art that addresses both future and past. If Romantic and postmodern views are in many respects divergent, at least many Romantics and contemporary writers would agree about that.

**References**


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