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Eyes inside words: Prose poetry, imagism, aesthetic empathy and autobiographical memory

Abstract:

One of the features of contemporary prose poetry is that it often makes conspicuous use of imagery, in some cases drawing on techniques pursued by the Imagist movement in the early 20th century. In Ezra Pound's words, the Imagists were interested in 'art that bears true witness ... art that is most precise'. Contemporary prose poets frequently try to honour the spirit of Pound's comment as they make images in their prose poems and, in doing so, providing readers with a way of imaginatively entering their works, enabling them to read them '*from within*'. Visual imagery in prose poetry provides a pathway through which readers are able to achieve aesthetic empathy with such works, allowing them to read these works as if their propositions are *actually and presently* the case. While the same may be said for poetry more generally, we argue that it is especially the case in prose poetry, where the rectangular form draws the reader into a room-like space. This tends to generate a compressed sense of timespace and thus intensify the effects of imagery and its connections to autobiographical memory. In the absence of line breaks and the kinds of closure associated with lineated poetry, visual imagery also helps crystallise the utterance of prose poems, bringing it into focus – almost as if prose poems see and, in turn, are able to be *seen through*.

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1. Approaching prose poetry

Prose poetry is a literary form that – as its oxymoronic name suggests – comfortably fits no single literary genre. Prose runs in the veins of prose poetry and prose poetic works are read sentence by sentence, much as we read other prose works. Yet, because these works are also poetic – often in surprising ways – they signal that they will not provide the kind of reading experience usually expected from prose. Their compressed paragraphs and (frequent) full justification also function differently to lineated poetry in the way they knit together, rather than separate, lines, words and images, allowing for a different reading experience than other forms of prose and poetry.

What one may call lyric poetry's friction of distance (the lineation of traditional poetic texts tends to denaturalise their forms of utterance and require readers to work hard to enter them) is lessened by prose poetry's paragraphs. Such paragraphs – familiar in form to everyone who has encountered a novel, newspaper or short story – allow readers opportunities for ready access beyond the text's intimate perimeter:

Qwerty

The letter 'I' on my computer keyboard has worn off. Blank, black key eyeballing me. You find the unmarked 'I' amusing. The other keys have their bold, upper case letters unmarred and you are telling me my ego has worn it out. I remind you that it's 'id' that starts with 'I' but you are too busy singing Jim Diamond's 'I Should Have Known Better'. I remember you stroking my hair and counting freckles on my shoulders. You had a light touch, like the ping of tiny pegs hitting a keyboard membrane. Sometimes you would tap my freckles like you were tapping out a story on your laptop. I fell asleep to a lullaby of clicking computer keys. (Atherton 2015: n.p.)

As it foregrounds its use of figurative language, a prose poem such as this one is very little concerned with telling a story. Readers entering this work find their reading experience being governed by transformative poetic modes that subvert any expectation that – because this work is written in prose – it will contain a clear narrative thread. Instead it focuses on a construction of events that is not *primarily* governed by the movement of time.

This is not to suggest that prose poems do not address time but that they frequently do so in ways more usually associated with works of lyric poetry – which is to say that (as Jonathan Culler writes of lyric poems) their primary concern is not about the succession of events but with 'the present of lyric enunciation' (Culler 2015: 36). Unlike most lyric poems, the prose poem does this in a single textual flow, escaping the formalising effects of lineation and drawing the reader towards and into the notional territory that the poem occupies. The prose poetry paragraph becomes like a room the reader may inhabit, even if such inhabitation is sometimes a little discomfiting. In 'Qwerty', for example, the juxtaposition and enunciation of the first and second person in the work is contained and internalised in the rectangular form.

Margot Singer points out the importance of imaginative space in poetry, and prose poems share many of the characteristics she mentions. Their compressed texts form an oblong on the page, looking like cousins to poems even as they simultaneously claim

kinship with other prose forms – and even appear a little like rectangular rooms viewed from above:

Poets understand that in writing we're not just thinking, but building, constructing stanzas (literally, in Italian, 'rooms') that the reader moves through not just chronologically but spatially as well. [Conventional] prose writers, on the other hand, tend to think of structure in terms of time, not space. From Aristotle on, we've focused on beginnings, middles, ends – what happened first, and then, and then. Narrative requires time. (Singer 2013: 77)

Further, in deploying and foregrounding techniques such as metaphor, metonymy and simile – and what one might call hyper-real and condensed imagery – prose poems invite readers to occupy them much as they might occupy a complex daydream, taking them slantwise into places that do not fully belong to the waking, quotidian world. Poetic imagery tends to open up the space of literary writing and slow the movement of time. Such imagery functions to allow the reader to see that confined and constrained literary spaces, however room-like, may also be somewhat balloon-like, expanding and contracting the reader's perception rather than, like so much conventional prose, carrying the reader traveller-like to their next destination.

In many cases, one must, as it were, understand and appreciate prose poems from inside if they are to constitute a satisfying reading experience – and internalising the reading experience in this way requires an imaginative journey of aesthetic empathy. One must be able to connect both emotionally and intellectually with the work, and internalise its key meanings and connotations. To pursue the metaphor of prose poems as rooms, one must open the door of the work and enter inside in order to look around and understand the fittings and furniture. Or, expressing this in different terms, one must be able to identify to a significant extent with what a prose poem says. This does not have to be a complete identification on the part of the reader, but it does require them to move far enough into the work's main tropes and ideas to be able to imagine themselves *being spoken* by the work and, in many cases – and as we discuss below – *seeing through* the work.

This matters more in reading prose poetry than it does in reading other kinds of prose because prose poems are usually so compact and condensed that a reader who fails to 'enter' a prose poem has few other readerly satisfactions available to them. Unlike novels and short stories, where there are satisfactions connected to narrative, plot and character development available even to the relatively uninvolved reader, a prose poem is able only to offer an interlude of reading – and the satisfactions of appreciating, and perhaps puzzling out, the imagistic, metaphoric and metonymic content it may possess. Reading a satisfying prose poem is a way into a compressed and intense period of engagement with a text, often not unlike an intense and intimate encounter with another person. Many prose poems conjure beguiling and suggestive spaces that ask for the reader's active participation in making them fully imagined.

As RK Elliott says, 'When we do make the expression our own, we are experiencing the poem *from within*' (1972: 146; emphasis in original). If this does not occur, the reader is unlikely to invest enough in the work to make any complex sense of it. While extended prose narratives often 'hook' their readers by getting them to care about what

will happen next, many prose poems engage their readers by prompting them to consider what it would be like if the prose poem's propositions were *actually and presently* the case – even when these propositions are obviously unrealistic (as are many daydreams) in quotidian terms, or are based on the reconstruction of a memory. While arguments such as Elliott's also apply, more generally, to poetry – and especially lyric poetry – this article focuses on the distinctiveness of prose poetry to argue that the reader's experience 'within' this form is intensified by its main formal element – its disposition on the page. Prose poetry provides a useful case study in the examination of visual imagery, aesthetic empathy and autobiographical timespace because these poetic features frequently function in heightened ways in prose poetry's intimate confines.

2. Prose poetry, aesthetic empathy, imagery and figurative language

The capacity for readers to connect empathically¹ with poetry is attested to by the long history of readers responding to poems as though they are personally implicated within them – even reading poems by strangers at their weddings and funerals as if such poems were able to speak for them and for their loved ones. And it is true that any poem speaks for all readers who wishes to claim its words as their own. Although some poems may be chosen for such ceremonial occasions because they communicate directly and fairly unambiguously, at other times poetry is selected because its figurative language has the capacity to inveigle itself into an intimate relationship with readers or listeners, and also to register the complexity of human feeling and thinking with particular subtlety. Such language requires interpretation and application in order to be understood and appreciated, and aesthetic responses to complex language are partly driven by the yield of pleasure that is obtained from disentangling and clarifying its various layers of often simultaneously presented meaning.

Taking his cue from philosopher Ted Cohen – who writes that 'there is a unique way in which the maker and the appreciator of a metaphor are drawn closer to one another' (1978: 8) – Edward Hirsch contends that 'the maker and the appreciator of a metaphor are brought into [a] deeper relationship ... because the speaker issues a concealed invitation through metaphor which the listener makes a special effort to accept and interpret' (1999: 15). This assertion may be broadened to include the reader's 'effort' to apprehend and enter all of the figurative language of a poem, whether that language is strictly metaphorical or not. Cohen claims that:

in both tasks – realizing that the expression is intended metaphorically, and seeing what to make of it – the hearer typically employs a number of assumptions about the speaker: what the speaker believes, what the speaker believes about what the hearer believes (which includes beliefs about what the speaker thinks the hearer can be expected to believe about the speaker). (1978: 8)

In effect, Cohen's words constitute a succinct characterisation of the journey of aesthetic empathy, as a reader (or, in Cohen's terminology, 'hearer') enters into a (not necessarily benign) relationship with the language of a text. However this connection between reader and text only becomes aesthetic empathy when the symbols of a text are embraced and embodied by the reader or, as early twentieth-century American

psychologist and poet June Downey says, when reading becomes ‘a final assimilation of the projected experiences’ (1999: 179).

The concept of aesthetic empathy is a relatively recent development but it can be applied to all acts of reading. It is well known that the German word *Einfühlung* was first used in the modern sense by Robert Vischer in 1873, and the English version of the word, *empathy*, was coined by Edward B Titchener in 1909. Susan Lanzoni points out what is perhaps less well known: that ‘at the turn of the 20th century, empathy was best known as an aesthetic theory that captured the reader’s participatory and kinaesthetic engagement with objects of art’ and that it ‘entailed an imagined bodily immersion in the shapes, forms, and lines of objects and the natural world’ (2014: 34).

In employing this concept of aesthetic empathy we will focus on how recognising the possibility for empathy between reader and text also enables a consideration of the way imagery in prose poetry may function as a conduit allowing readers to enter a prose poem immersively. The imagery of prose poetry can, in this sense, act as a kind of empathy conductor, channelling the reader into and around the space that a prose poem occupies, and expanding that space so that the reader feels comfortable or safe within its bounds. And it is in this sense that we have invoked the idea of experiencing a prose poem as being somewhat like experiencing a daydream, following Freud’s use of the daydream as a way of describing a state of creative dreaming on the part of a writer:

A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfilment in the creative work. The work itself exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory. (1985: 139)

When absorbed in a prose poem the reader – and here we are assuming that our notional reader is reasonably sophisticated – may enter a similar daydream-like state as that experienced by a writer. In such a state, they may be transported into an experience that is likely to have some broad features in common with what the writer brought to mind when composing the work – or which, at least, they hoped to evoke when constructing their images. This is to say that, in most cases, the linguistic prompts offered by a literary work will tend to yield readerly responses that are recognisably connected to the writer’s imaginative projections, even if in their finest detail the reader’s visualisations – and the ideas they draw from them – remain particular to that reader. In prose poetry, these visualisations are connected not only to language but to the experience of reading within an intimate space defined by a discrete and delimited block of text. This rectangle of text is reminiscent of a thought or speech bubble in its containment.

In asserting this, we would like to make use of Kendall L Walton’s notion ‘that the words of lyric poems [and we also read prose poems here] are understood to be written or spoken or thought, “seriously”, by someone (either fictional or actual) other than the reader or listener’ (2015: 58). Walton develops this ‘notion’ with reference to RK Elliott’s observations about experiencing a poem from ‘within’ or ‘without’, part of which we have already quoted:

Elliott distinguished between what he called experiencing a work of art ‘from without’ and experiencing it ‘from within’ ... ‘A poem can be perceived ... as if it were the

speech or thought of another person' he wrote and 'it is possible to make this expression our own' ... When we do make the expression our own, we are experiencing the poem *from within*; otherwise we experience it *from without* ... The idea may be ... that in the 'from within' case we not only *recognize* this other person – 'the poet (*qua* "speaker" of the poem)' – and her expressive behaviour; we also empathize with her, imaginatively occupying her shoes and feeling (somewhat) as she does. (2015: 59–60; emphasis in original)

While the idea of an empathic connection between a reader and a poem is appealing, in practice it clearly depends on the relationship between a particular reader and particular poem. Louise M Rosenblatt contends that "the poem" comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and "the text" ... A specific reader and a specific text at a particular time and place: change any of these, and there occurs a different circuit, a different event – a different poem' (1994: 14). However, while every 'live circuit' may produce a different poem, these 'different poems' are usually not entirely different, or even very different, because the text of every poem contains, as it were, loosely precise instructions for readers. Such 'instructions' come in many forms, and one of the most important of them is contained in a poem's imagery.

Imagery is of such central importance to the reading and understanding of poems of all kinds that even when Rosenblatt characterises the reader's aesthetic responses to poetic texts in theoretical terms she speaks in imagistic language:

So interwoven are the aesthetic responses to a text that when the response to one word is changed, it may affect the organization or structure of the whole work. Instead of a rigid stencil, a more valid image for the text seems to be something like an open-meshed woven curtain, a mesh of flexible strands that hold a certain relationship to one another, but whose total shape and pattern changes as any one part is pulled or loosened. One can imagine the reader peering through the curtain, affecting its shape and the pattern of the mesh by the tension or looseness with which he is holding it, and filling in the openings from his own palette of colours. (1994: 76)

Rosenblatt's emphasis on the importance of readers' individual responses to texts is certainly important. However, if the understanding of poems is the result of individual acts of reading, and coloured by the reader's own palette, contemporary prose poets also provide a great deal of colour of their own, especially in the form of visual imagery – and good readers of such works are attuned to the complex meanings that such imagery carries.

Further, as June Downey writes, aesthetic reactions – which we apply to the to-and-fro experience of reading and, as it were, the ingestion of a poetic text – involve a variety of transformative processes:

In aesthetic reactions, the projection of affective qualities is in process of taking place. A universe of emotional objects is in course of construction ... Self is the very core of such creation since it is in process of projecting or externalising itself. The so-called secondary qualities of matter – visual, auditory, olfactory – are essential to the aesthetic product but kinaesthetic and organic qualities contribute the self-feelings that unify the object. It has been said that in many cases of empathy we subjectify an object rather than objectify the self and undoubtedly this is true. (1999: 177–78)

This transformative process occurs in distinctive ways in prose poetry, given the form's particular emphasis on constructing a text that is simultaneously poetry and prose. To explore this issue further we will turn our attention to Imagism and its emphasis on the role and importance of poetic imagery in making poetic meaning.

3. Imagism: a brief recapitulation

Contemporary prose poets' and their readers' awareness of the power of imagery is due, in part, to the pervasive and continuing influence of the Imagist poets from the early 20th century, who were interested in 'art that bears true witness ... art that is most precise' (Pound 1913: 162). As a result, writers and readers alike inhabit a poetic age in which poetic imagery – and visual images in particular – are front and centre of what is understood as 'poetic'. June Downey writes about the 'so-called secondary qualities of matter – visual, auditory, olfactory – [that] are essential to the aesthetic product' and, where poetry is concerned, the 'visual' as it is expressed through poetic imagery is undoubtedly the most important of these qualities.

Visual imagery is a feature of a great deal of poetry, from the first poetic texts that we have inherited until the present day. For example, the archaic Greek poet, Sappho makes use of highly suggestive imagery and, famously, opens a poem with images of war, before contrasting them with the idea of love. Jim Powell's translation renders these words as follows:

Some say thronging cavalry, some say foot soldiers,
others call a fleet the most beautiful of
sights the dark earth offers, but I say it's what-
ever you love best. (Sappho 1993: 28)

An equally imagistic opening of a poem, also from archaic Greece, is Pindar's ode 'Olympian 1':

Best is water, while gold, like fire blazing
in the night, shines preeminent amid lordly wealth. (Pindar 1997: 47)

It wasn't until the early twentieth century, however, that Imagism as a movement helped set the scene for the sometimes self-consciously imagistic free verse poems that have been prevalent ever since. Imagism as a movement soon passed, but its influence has remained strong. Imagism's emergence in the early twentieth century in London was during a period of European political and social disillusionment and alienation, which also saw the rise of other literary and artistic movements, such as Dadaism, cubism, and surrealism. These movements challenged existing artistic and literary norms and, in some cases, critiqued culture and society more generally. It was a period, as Art Berman has commented, that was very much engaged with the notion that 'the visual can provide direct and even prelinguistic knowledge, since the psyche presumably has operations that precede or take logical precedence over the formation of language' (1994: 49).

The Imagist movement was instigated not long before the First World War by TE Hulme, FS Flint, Hilda Doolittle, Richard Aldington and Ezra Pound, among others –

with TE Hulme's 1909 poems 'Autumn' and 'A City Sunset' inaugurating the movement in practice (Jones 1976: 15). Fired with enthusiasm for the visual arts, including Japanese prints, along with symbolist poetry, Japanese verse forms and Chinese T'ang Dynasty poetry, Pound published in the journal *Poetry* a now famous 'note' under RS Flint's name (Rainey 2005: 94) entitled 'Imagisme'. He advocated 'Direct treatment of the "thing", whether subjective or objective' (Flint 1913: 199). Elizabeth Loizeaux writes that 'Imagism ... desir[ed] the instantaneous revelation the visual image is thought to have' (2010: 3).

In discussing such issues, Hetherington and Fitton argue that:

Imagism, one of the 20th and 21st centuries' most influential – if officially short-lived – poetic movements was further evidence of the way in which many early modernist poets wanted to 'see' or visualise the world in their work through imagery. This tendency to look for visual imagery in poetry has continued into the 21st century and has become so pervasive that Peter Jones's statement from the 1970s might equally be applied to 21st-century poetry: 'The truth is that imagistic ideas still lie at the centre of our poetic practice'. (2013: 21)

4. June Downey, aesthetic empathy and poetic imagery

Early in the twentieth century June Downey explored ways in which imagery functioned in poetry and, as Susan Lanzoni remarks, 'experimented on empathic responses to poetry' (2014: 34). One of Downey's pioneering interests was how imagery functioned in poetic works. For example, in discussing imagery in Shelley's 'Prometheus Unbound' she comments that:

Shelley's readers ... find their imagery enriched by all manner of delicate connotations. Where, for instance, the silver and azure of the mystic shell are said to be like lulled music, one does not translate colour into sound, but surrenders, instead, to a delightful relaxation such as is induced by soft music, or else one visualizes the shell to the accompaniment of orchestral strains or to that of the ocean-murmur resounding faintly in the shell's pale whorls. (1999: 100)

As much as it illuminates Shelley's poetry, such analysis perhaps demonstrates the difficulty of writing about the complex suggestive effects of poetic imagery and the ways in which aesthetic empathy works. However, it does point to the way in which imagistic effects in poetry are, to some extent, translatable from one reader to the next, even if different readers also interpret images in particular, and sometimes idiosyncratic, ways.

Visual imagery in prose poems often functions to transport a reader almost instantaneously into an imaginative and empathic 'space' that, at least for the duration of their reading experience, becomes their own. In discussing some lines by Edgar Allan Poe from his poem 'The Valley of Unrest', Downey writes of the reader's engagement with these lines as being characterised by 'dreamlikeness, atmosphere, richness and fluidity of suggestion' (1999: 7). Many poems and prose poems have the capacity to convey such qualities to the reader, until they almost seem to become the reader's own 'daydream':

Night

Night was a clean skin lying on cobbles. Facades of buildings fell towards moonlight as your hands gathered them in. Don't write about this, you said, and I agreed that I wouldn't. You will, you said, and I agreed that I must – once language had found silvered eels of water writhing in the square; once our words had faded into a crepuscular early morning. Boats banged against moorings and tidal uncertainties, a fabric of rotting brickwork. You were a pale face against a sieving sky (Hetherington 2016: n.p.)

This prose poem presents a town or city as a set of dreamlike images, full of the suggestiveness of memory. It invites readers to project themselves into its scenes and thereby to construct their own imaginative journeys.

Lanzoni comments that the 'meaning of empathy for [Downey] was close to the literal translation of *Einfühlung*' or, as Downey herself describes it: 'a process of "feeling-in", in which motor and emotional attitudes, however originating, are projected outside of the self' (1999: 176; also in Lanzoni 2014: 34). Downey characterised aesthetic empathy in complex and beguiling terms which emphasise the way in which both textual material and reader responses are meshed together in any act of complex reading:

The aesthetic doctrine of empathy stresses, chiefly, behaviour patterns released through the sheer activity of perception, a much more evasive process than that of social identification. Moreover, while the response to art may be that of the participant (identification in the narrower and popular meaning of the term, when, for example, the reader feels himself to be the hero of drama or novel) the truly aesthetic response does not stop there. It goes beyond introjection and projection to a final assimilation of the projected experiences, a complex integration. (1999: 179)

Lanzoni also comments on Downey's great interest in Imagism, and states that she 'deemed the images in the work of these poets [TE Hulme, Ezra Pound, HD and Amy Lowell] crisp, clear and inventive; neither predictable nor stereotyped' (2014: 35). Downey characterises Amy Lowell's imagination as:

delight[ing] not only in pictorial but in sculptural effects. Movement enters into its imaginal stuff, but it is movement *seen* rather than *felt* ... Movement for Miss Lowell is always on the verge of hardening into something solidly visible ... Her definitely visualized and highly coloured scenes echo with manifold sounds, and are invaded by fragrances. There is much evidence of preoccupation with touch and temperature images, another sign of the sculptural imagination. Always, spatial relationships are delicately conceived and accurately impressed upon her content. (1999: 107–8; emphasis in original)

She writes about Ezra Pound's famous short poem, 'In a Station of the Metro' with similar enthusiasm. Here is the poem:

In A Station of the Metro
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Jones 1976: 95)

And here are Downey's remarks about the work:

when the suggested fusion occurs the reader is submerged in that feeling of poetic beauty which is one of the mysteries of experience. Innumerable pale faces in the dusk of a dim cavern suddenly whiten, blossom against a blackness that shivers with spiritual desolation. (1999: 145)

Downey highlights how the language of the Imagist poets enabled the process of aesthetic empathy and was persuasive partly because it represented fresh and inventive ways of seeing.

Prose poetry uses a variety of techniques to make full use of its limited space and, in many cases, these are imagistic techniques akin to those employed by the Imagist poets. In 2015, the International Poetry Studies Institute commissioned a series of five chapbooks of prose poetry focused on the quotidian: *Keys, Nets, Gaps, Pegs* and *Jars*. These chapbooks feature prose poems that make conspicuous use of imagery and which, in doing so, provide the reader with multiple entry points to their texts.

Jen Webb's 'Building the Wall' from her chapbook, *Gaps*, combines memory and metaphor within a 'backwards-told-story', to discuss the strength of the family unit. Webb's use of vivid imagery, expressed in the simplest of terms, shepherds the reader into the poetic space. The prose poem self-reflexively references its own boundaries in its repetition of the word 'wall'. Indeed, if 'all we need ... is within the walls', then readers find themselves invited into the prose poem's four walls. Rather than this being an oppressive space, it is 'secure', safe and almost intimate; a kind of inner sanctum:

They brought in truckloads of stone and heaped it by the garden door. For weeks we had to squeeze through the gap, or climb in and out the windows. There was some damage, of course. Someone tripped on a rock, and crushed the daphne bush: someone else, falling, tore at the ivy. The stonemason took his sweet time, placing one rock on the other, making the wall secure. We followed him, tucking plants into the gaps between stones, finding the tender intervals between. The wall lasted for years. Our children learned the toeholds that afforded their escape, and every week the police were banging at the door, returning one or other. Not us though. We never left. All we needed was within the walls. (2015: n.p.)

The pictorial aspect of this prose poem is essential to its ability to invite empathy. As John E Schwiebert argues in his discussion of Whitman's Imagistic poems:

Like the poems of the modern Imagists, they are quintessentially short. They emphasize concentration and accuracy of vision. They are 'structured by the single image or metaphor.' They are, of course, in free verse ... Finally, in their exact attention to the image, they refuse to 'implicate the poem's effect in extended abstract meaning'. (1990: 16)

Webb's poem courts readers' subjective experiences of family through her use of images which she presents 'objectively, to be experienced directly, in and of themselves, by the reader' (Schwiebert 1990: 16). In this way, despite the often-emotive subject matter of family and children, this prose poem remains remarkably free of overt emotion or, as Herbert Read stated in another context, 'unclouded by rhetoric or sentiment' (2015: n.p.).

The interstices in this prose poem can be understood, metaphorically, as helping to house the reader, who is able to ‘squeeze through the gaps’, ‘find the tender intervals’ and ‘learn the toeholds’, like the children. The use of the imagery of plants and growth is also evocative of proliferation and life, against the obdurate stone in which it is embedded. The children are partly symbolised by the plants that are ‘tucked into the gaps’ while the parents are the rock-like foundations of the family unit. Furthermore, home is safe: when the children ‘escape’ they are brought back by the police. All of these images function to invite or allow the reader into this prose poem’s imaginative re-creation. They enable and encourage a shared empathic space.

5. Excavating autobiographical memory in prose poetry

Language in Imagistic poems and prose poems may create ‘fresh and inventive ways of seeing’, but why do we care about ways of seeing when they are given to us in a text and are at least one remove from our own experience of quotidian reality? Part of the answer to this difficult question lies in the way that poets in general – and prose poets in particular – make use of memory material. If poetic imagery is able to appeal to and prompt readerly empathy, then the presence in prose poetry of autobiographical memory material rendered imagistically, may have the ability to solicit a connection between the reader’s memories and identity, and the poet’s evocation of a past self. Autobiographical memory is defined by Martin A Conway and David C Rubin as ‘memory for the events of one’s life’ (1993: 103), yet such memories are neither always reliable nor complete. Everyone to some extent recreates their autobiographical memories for the purposes of constructing coherent self-narratives, and in order to conform to acceptable structures of thinking and feeling. McAdams argues that ‘the self is many things, but *identity* is a life story ... complete with settings, scenes, characters, plot, and themes’ (2003: 187), demonstrating the way identity is expressed within often complex narrative structures.

Poets frequently mine their memories in order to construct a new poetic frame. The re-telling of a past event may be given relevance by shifting its time and location to a present or nearly-present context, enabling memories to be played out with a sense of immediacy and in dialogue with contemporary issues. Anita Kasabova (2009: 1) argues, ‘In order to reproduce a past experience in the present, imagination is necessary for representing a past episode as if it were present’, and Hetherington writes that recreating a past event in poetry involves reimagining it and ‘charg[ing it] with present feeling’ (Hetherington 2011: 112). In the reconstruction and re-imagination of these events readers are, as it were, invited to interpose themselves in the gaps that memory elicits – and, as they participate in a poet’s memory re-enacted in a poetic work, their participation is likely to induce an empathic response. In this way, the reader is able to participate in emotional responses – a fusion of their own responses and those of the poet – connected to that memory material.

However, while the charged nature of autobiographical memory, and the tendency of people to project their memories into narrative form, coupled with the poet’s re-imagining and *re-imagining* of personal events in a poetic context, help to make aesthetic empathy possible, the poetic self in poems and prose poems is a representation created

by the poet. It is a simulation of a past self rather than the past self in any literal sense (which is why autobiographical readings of poems that link a poet's actual life circumstances to poetic intimacies, or the first person 'I' of poems, are usually misleading and limited). Ana Margarida Abrantes argues that autobiographical memories can be:

true without being literal, as they represent the personal meaning of an event at the cost of historical accuracy. Autobiographical truth is hence not a finished concept, but a flexible construct which develops at the rhythm of one's self-definition. (2010: 161)

The poet and the reader experience the autobiographical memory newly when it is revived in poetry. Both are implicated freshly into the poetic narrative as the past and present become an amalgam that reinfects a putative memory. Empathy between the reader and the poet's simulated self is built on a sharing of pertinent experiences, but these are related *kinds* of experiences rather than the same events. The reader contemplates and reassesses their own encounters in light of what they read.

Hetherington argues that memory and poetry are irrevocably connected in their shared attributes:

Memory and poetry remain intimately connected partly because poetry – with its capacity for compressing language, for foregrounding the play and potency of imagery and for suggesting that numerous connotative meanings and possibilities inhere in a single text – to some extent mimics memory's way of condensing what were original different experiences into one 'memory' event and of speaking symbolically of personal and intimate experiences. (2011: 9)

Many memories, like poems, work at the level of symbolism and abstraction and these features demand that readers 'project themselves into the represented events' (Mar and Oatley 173) in order to comprehend them.

But how does a poet excavate their memory for poetic creation? Interestingly, the process itself is sometimes discussed in metaphorical terms that link poetry and memory in a series of conceits. Bruce M Ross writes that 'poets know more about memories than psychologists do' (1991: 3) and likens memory and its retrieval to time spent in a waiting room, an enquiry at a Lost and Found department and, finally to ransacking old luggage:

Every person possesses not only a waiting room of memories where old favourites are recalled but also a Lost and Found where recollections from the past appear without being recognised. Other less accessible memories are hidden in mental suitcases to which we have misplaced the keys; elsewhere suitcases are discovered empty that we thought were full. Piled in with the rest are convenient imitation packages of memories constructed out of dreams and fantasies that were never paid for with experience. Every baggage room full of memories is open day and night, for no living traveller rides free of the burden of old luggage. (1991: vii)

This conceit positions people as travellers, weighed down by past baggage and, in such a light, the prose poet might be identified as an archaeologist of memory and the functioning of aesthetic empathy to be, in part, a subtle act of archaeological complicity between reader and poet. Matthew Corrigan (1973–74) and Jon Stallworthy (1982)

employ the concept of archaeology in their articles on poetry, without developing it at any great length, and since the 1980s the idea of poets as archaeologists has rarely been used to characterise the process through which poets reach for, and revivify, autobiographical memories.

It is a theme Hetherington explicitly explores in his prose poetry, seeking to unearth meaning from deep memory and placing it in the present context for scrutiny. His prose poem, 'Archaeology', uses the metaphor as a way of travelling in time. This work combines future, present and past timespaces in its narrative flow, extending backwards and forwards from the narrator's present position. In his scholarly work, Hetherington suggests that such poetic narratives are a 'backwards-told-story [where] the past is in front of, rather than behind the poet who makes use of autobiographical material' (2012: 1). Memory and personal history underpin present and future contexts; the past informs any kind of grappling with, or understanding of, self:

Archaeology

He could see his future. He'd been excavating all week, turning up old foundations, burials, patches of Roman road. Archaeologists exclaimed, declaring the place out of bounds, a 'national treasure'. But his ancestors had lived there; this was family business. In his cellar was the earthenware jar. At evening he pulled its lid free and lifted the manuscript clump. Old as soil, inscribed with strange characters, he tore pages free. He would make them speak out; he would learn their lore. (Hetherington 2016: n.p.)

This prose poem understands writing as a form of 'excavation'. The 'lifted manuscript' is buried not in the earth, but in an 'earthenware' jar and the 'cellar' acts as an ancestral burial site. More references to entombment and the poet as archeologist are evident in the simile 'old as soil' and in the 'clump' of manuscript that is liberated from the jar. This work is about identity, and about unearthing the past in order to understand the future. The somewhat ambiguously-inflected suggestion is that buried 'treasure' should be disenthralled and shared rather than being placed 'out of bounds' or behind glass. In this way, the prose poem invites the reader to participate in the shared experience of genealogy, so that the 'strange[ness]' of the past and its 'lore' might be made relevant to the present and future.

Further, the prose poem's ubiquitous rectangle may be viewed as the site of an archaeological dig. The past is buried and it is only in the process of digging into this plot or space, that fragments or relics can be unearthed. Memories are exhumed in the process of sifting through soil and combing the earth for clues to the past. Hetherington extends his exploration of the connection between prose poetry, memory and identity in a suite of 27 prose poems entitled 'Memory Fields'. Significantly, the fourth poem explores memory as excavation:

Fields of memory are grassy with bones – of wayward dreams and elusive encounters. They hold us to place, or so we believe – our backwards-told story like a fairy tale. Characters are fleshed with repeating words; we admire their clothes for an out-of-date shtick. We imagine their moves; ponder strange motives – 'why did they do that?' and 'what were they thinking?' 'A-long-time-ago' is one of our answers – code for lives that inhabit a gap: our own, our decisions; all that made us. (Hetherington 2015: n.p.)

Memory is 'elusive' in this work and our past selves are 'characters' retrospectively viewed by our present selves, with some irony and amusement. Memories are simultaneously familiar and 'strange'; we remember the 'rep[etition of some] words' but we can rarely recall, verbatim, past conversations. In the 'gaps' in memory, Hetherington posits, the poet must 'imagine their moves; ponder strange motives' that may no longer be remembered or accessible. These are the 'bones' of memory, the parts that point to the whole; a quintessential metonym. The morsels of the past are devoured in the present and their missing parts re-imagined.

6. Aesthetic empathy, imagery and autobiographical memory

Paul Munden's prose poem 'Arthroscopy/Sports Day, 1971', from his chapbook *Keys*, explores memory in a series of imagistic flashes. The use of the year '1971' in the title suggests that this is a biographical moment compressed into a prose poem: a form of 'time capsule' (Robinson 1986: 19). Here, the poet simulates a 'Sports Day', 45 years prior to the prose poem's composition:

The smell of cut grass. The surgeon's view shows threadbare ground where the shotput circle splays to a heavily pockmarked V. A wayward flick of the wrist and it's the high jump. The bar being raised. Your lazy run quickens, each of us lifting a vicarious leg as you scissor the air. Watch the old footage, re-wind and re-believe you'll make it through. Try to miss your father's grimace as he bends and clutches his knee. Those slivers of loose cartilage. The elusive meniscus slipping offscreen. (2015: n.p.)

Time is cleverly warped in this prose poem, so that the memories are not only 'backwards-told' but also told forwards and sideways. Triggered by 'the smell of cut grass' and 'the surgeon's view' of 'slivers of loose cartilage', the high jump is re-lived via the narrator's memory of the event, and his recollection of the 'old footage' that captured it. This prose poem turns on the image of the screen, as central to the reimagining of a traumatic memory. The surgeon's ultrasound screen is twinned with the screen of the home movie (and perhaps the rectangular form of this particular prose poem might also be viewed as a screen).

The work highlights shared experiences and different ways of viewing the high jump, encouraging the reader to see in a like manner, and thus to enter inside the text. In this way, the event, (presumably the Sports Day from the title) can be replayed on high rotation. Munden's sophisticated use of time references the way poetry may be re-read in much the same way as memory, or a film being re-watched. This poem may be said to 'see', and the reader to see into and through it. Acknowledging the reader's close connection to the narrator – in the sense that they are both watching the accident unfold – encourages an empathic readerly response.

The ambiguous use of second person in lines such as, 'Watch the old footage, re-wind and re-believe you'll make it through. Try to miss your father's grimace as he bends and clutches his knee', is another technique that invites the reader to participate from inside the work. And the line, 'lifting a vicarious leg as you scissor the air' depicts the viewer in empathic union with the high jumper. It encourages a similarly empathic response from the reader. This use of the second person pronoun coupled with the

slipperiness of time cleverly blurs identity so that the ‘you’ is simultaneously father, narrator and reader. In some small way, the knee injury is felt by all.

Munden’s prose poem develops intimacy between the poem’s speaker and the reader by demonstrating the relevance of the past for future timespaces. John A Robinson argues that:

The archival function of memory has often been given primary emphasis in biographical and historical work. According to this view, life memories are time capsules, records of an unrepeatable past. As such they can be used both to recount the past and to teach lessons for the future. The intimate association between memory and narrative arises from this urge to use the past to instruct present and future generations. An awareness of the fallibility of memory, however, is as old as man’s fascination with memory itself. (1986: 19)

Munden’s work ends on a final vivid image that is both physiological and confronting – its use of the word ‘meniscus’. This thin, fibrous cartilage is in sharp focus for the reader, before it floats away: a metaphor for what lies between one thing and another, or between memory and its unreliability. The use of the screen metaphor aims to capture the essence of the Sports Day 1971 but, in the end, it is a conjuring of ‘old footage’ spliced between multiple viewpoints that tells a fuller story.

The presence of imagery in a prose poem – allied with techniques such as metaphor, metonymy and simile – tends to underscore an event’s immediacy. Readers ‘see’ into the work through its imagery and begin, as it were, to witness what they read. In this way, a work is able to engage and stimulate readers’ visual imaginations and allow them to connect its imagery with their own real-world experiences of similar images. There remains disagreement about how mental imagery functions in the brain, and even debate about exactly what mental imagery may be – Stephen M Kosslyn et al write that a ‘major problem in theorizing about the nature of mental images has been their inherently private nature’ (2006: 4) – but imagery has been used by writers since time immemorial because of its capacity to characterise, depict and transfer to the reader visions of old and new worlds.

Visual imagery enables engaged readers to empathise with a prose poet’s articulation of insights into life’s rhythms and purposes – especially at critical poetic junctures where questioning opens up a prose poem’s imaginative spaces. Craig R Barclay argues that:

In the poetic autobiographical form the author neither sermonizes nor acts out life on a stage. The major purpose of the poetic form is to present a life that reflects an ongoing effort to discover self. At any moment, the author is uncertain about the meaning of life; readers must import that information for themselves. The truth value of a poetic autobiography is carried by the author’s constant search for meaning in life. The stress is placed in the process of becoming, not on a message about what the author’s life was or means for the reader. Descriptive details provide a context and setting for events; they reflect more the autobiographer’s imagination than reality. (1986: 85)

Imagery and associated metaphors and metonyms, and the prose poem’s tendency to eschew closure while opening out its concerns for readerly inspection, invite readers to

identify – however provisionally – with the poet. And, by extension, the reader is prompted to contribute to the text aspects of their own grappling for meaning,

Having said this, not all readers are as empathic as others and the distinction between voyeurism and empathy in poetry is important to an understanding of the way readers may enter a text. Voyeuristic readers maintain a degree of distance from the texts they encounter, while empathic readers – who experience a work from ‘within’ – allow themselves to be gathered into the space of the poem. Bruce Bond contends that:

the tension that empathic listening gives to a poem remains critical to its power, a quality of speaking and being spoken, of going more deeply inward as if somewhere in there were the path to others. Empathy thus provides a model of what poetry longs to be, empathic in the sense of listening as it speaks. (2014: n.p.)

Prose poems have the capacity to usher the reader into its confined spaces through its use of visual imagery and, once a prose poem has been entered, its lack of line breaks implicitly encourages the reader to follow its sentences to its end. If visual imagery succeeds in transporting a reader into an aesthetically empathic experience, then the prose poem’s tightly cordoned-off space assists in holding the reader within the work.

7. Conclusion

The imagination is so-called because human beings tend to think imagistically – or that is certainly what poets throughout the ages have demonstrated in their works. Stephen M Kosslyn et al observe that mental images:

were at the heart of early theories of mental activity, dating at least as far back as the classic Greek philosophers and figuring predominantly in both philosophy (until the nineteenth century) and early scientific psychology ... Scholars accorded images a special role in thought on the basis of introspection – the process of ‘looking within’. (2006: 4)

Whatever the capacity of the brain to ‘see’ imagistically when not actually looking at what is being seen – and no doubt different individuals have different capacities in this regard – creative writers continually ask readers to understand significant parts of their works in terms of visual and other sensory imagery. As they do so, they invite readers to share their landscapes and depictions, their conjuring of the past, and their pictures of the present. While there are many ways in which poetry and prose poetry operate, this paper has focused on aspects of the prose poem’s particular capacities to generate aesthetic empathy and the connection of such empathy with memory.

Prose poetry is a literary form that is typically characterised by condensed and imagistic works that give priority to poetic suggestiveness rather than narrative, and that frequently situate their renderings of autobiographical memory in an immediate poetic present. To read such works well is more often than not to engage in an act – or a transport – of aesthetic empathy, and to find oneself remembering with June Downey that the ‘visual, auditory, olfactory – are essential to the aesthetic product’, and that ‘kinaesthetic and organic qualities contribute the self-feelings that unify the object’ (1999: 177–78).

Some prose poems even appear to see *for* a reader, as if they have eyes of their own. Or, to shift the metaphor, they convey a sense of being able to be seen into or through. Of course, what individual readers see in or through any particular prose poem may vary, but all readers who are seeing in this way are likely to be on a journey of aesthetic empathy, whether they know it or not.

Endnotes

1. The words 'empathic' and 'empathetic' are synonyms. While 'empathetic' has been gaining popularity in common usage, 'empathic' is the older term which the OED dates from 1904. We do not intend 'empathic' to be used in the specialised Science Fiction sense (from around 1959) where 'empathic' is derived from 'empath', describing someone who can read other people's feelings via ESP.

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