

*Broken forms: Prose poetry as hybridised genre in Australia*

**Paul Hetherington**  
University of Canberra  
[paul.hetherington@canberra.edu.au](mailto:paul.hetherington@canberra.edu.au)

**Cassandra Atherton**  
Deakin University  
[cassandra.atherton@deakin.edu.au](mailto:cassandra.atherton@deakin.edu.au)

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**Abstract:** Traditional literary genres, such as the novel, lyric poetry and short fiction have been at the centre of Australian literary practice since European colonisation. Increasingly, however, Australian creative writers are making use of narrative and poetic forms that do not sit comfortably within accepted genre classifications. They are doing so partly in order to respond to their encounters with fragmentation and multivalency and to register the disparate, the diverse and the 'broken' in postmodernity. It is possible that contemporary culture requires such literary forms in order to speak truthfully about the crises at the heart of modernity centred on identity, the interpenetration and mixing of cultures, and the need to find authentic ways of speaking. One form that crosses and destabilises genres is the prose poem. Prose poetry enables intimate lyrical gestures to be joined to a limited narrative discursiveness and signals that the 'prosaic' and the 'poetic' are frequently bound together. In doing so, it challenges assumptions about what may be 'said' in writing, and whether much of human experience in the twenty-first century may best be expressed through the

creation of 'in-between' literary spaces (and associated tropes of absence and indeterminacy), rather than through traditional generic models. Using examples from contemporary Australian prose poets, this paper demonstrates the way in which Australian prose poetry prioritises spaces of uncertainty and anxiety to rework the British and American canon and make its own identity.

**Keywords:** prose poetry; hybrid; in-between.

### **The conventional literary work**

Many traditional and conventionally constructed novels, short stories, biographies and autobiographies confirm that what we know is often not what we think we know, and what we believe of ourselves is sometimes a stark illusion. If one reads *Anna Karenina*, for example, or the works of Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, or many other novelists, or various biographies of significant figures—for instance, Richard Ellmann's magisterial 1959 biography of James Joyce—one knows that human beings have always been prone to doubt, failure, misunderstanding and self-delusion.

Yet, although reasonably conventional narrative works of these kinds are often profound and salutary, they make use of narrative techniques that, in general terms, do not replicate the crises and uncertainties they recount. As they tell of broken lives and misplaced understandings, they employ aesthetically pleasing and often rounded plots and points of view. Notwithstanding the literary innovations of Modernism and postmodernism—which have tended to emphasise the registration of indeterminacy, irresolution, doubt and even the instability of textual meanings—many literary works continue to present a whole that is at least notionally complete and reasonably coherent: a summarised life, a resolved narrative, a tale told, closure.

This is part of the beauty and satisfaction of a certain sort of literature—it edifies and enables readerly gratification by providing the intricacies and artifice a majority of readers associate with the 'literary.' It follows principles associated with notions of aesthetic unity and the fulfilment of narrative or dramatic arcs. It makes out of the disorderly and provisional nature of experience, a completed work. It may acknowledge that the story it tells is only part of something greater, and is perhaps just one more example of what has often been called the 'human condition,' but when the reader finishes such works, they often feel that they know most of what matters about what they have read.

Traditional lyric poetry also tends to emphasise what is complete in itself, however momentary the emotion or circumstance it conjures. A Shakespearean sonnet, for example, follows its own formalities towards closure and resolution:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;  
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:  
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (2014, n.pag.)

The form of this famous poem is partly its point, just as the form of a conventional narrative work of prose is partly what drives it and gives it meaning. To a considerable extent, the writer's skill is demonstrated in the way in which they are able to make their narrative or lyrical form aesthetically pleasing.

While the focus of this paper is not on defining or characterising the formal components and qualities of conventional literary novels, biographies or lyric poems—such matters have been written about at great length and by many critics elsewhere—in order to emphasise our point we would like to note with Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1968) that where lyric poems are concerned:

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

This is also true of other conventional literary forms. In the hands of a fine contemporary novelist, such as in John Banville's beautifully constructed work *The Sea* (2006), the literary aestheticisation of difficult experience is able to make it shimmer, as it were, in the reader's mind, and invest it with a deep poignancy:

They departed, the gods, on the day of the strange tide. All morning under a milky sky the waters in the bay had swelled and swelled, rising to unheard-of heights, the small waves creeping over parched sand that for years had known no wetting save for rain and lapping the very bases of the dunes. (3)

*The Sea* is about broken and disjunct lives and experiences. These are retold through its protagonist's recollection of childish events and, as the above excerpt that opens the novel demonstrates, evoked almost poetically in luminous prose. However, even such a harrowing work does not conjure the brokenness of postmodernity directly. It is too graceful and eloquent; it speaks too knowingly. Despite its concessions to mystery and

doubt, its narrative voice remains poised, polished and confident. This is not merely a matter of a narrative being told retrospectively by one of its chief protagonists, or a product of Banville's construction of an ironic distance between the narrator's confident voice and the sometimes bewildering narrative he recounts; there is a sense that Banville does not wish his wonderfully compelling style to be infected by the insufficiencies and confusions his work explores.

Furthermore, the British texts mentioned (and this is true of 'classic' American texts too) are examples of what has been considered Australia's literary inheritance, and they are part of the traditional literary 'canon.' In recent decades Australian writers have chosen to "write back" or provide "counter-discourse" (Thieme, 2001: 3) to this canon, in order to express dissatisfaction with the idea that these works may speak for the antipodean experience. In many cases, Australian texts have focused on fragmentation, fracture and rupture to address stereotypes and "European myths of Australia" (Thieme, 2001: 4). And, in saying this, we are not referencing self-consciously avant-garde literature that often makes a feature of broken, disjunct or opaque styles. We are talking instead about mainstream writers seeking ways to speak as clearly as possible of their experiences.

### **Insufficiency as a postmodern literary trope**

The hallmarks of many traditional literary forms, whether novels, biographies or poems, and whether written last century or last week, increasingly worry a cohort of readers and writers who recoil from the unities such works present, and who distrust the aesthetic imperatives they invoke. So many conventional works seem to assume that human lives and writerly narratives may make good sense in the telling; that time, as it runs through a narrative, may be understood and rendered meaningful through a relatively orderly understanding of the unfolding of days, weeks and years—even as many readers of such works do not primarily understand experience in this way.

Molly Andrews et al. (2004) note that:

Narratives come in many kinds; they are contradictory and fragmented; there is no such thing as a coherent story. There is also, in the aftermath of the grand 'narratives' of the social and political order, and in a time of identifications rather than identities, no entirely firm sociocultural ground from which to tell stories. Moreover, human subjectivity itself is diverse and fragmented, and carries within it the pushes and pulls of various available narratives, which are contingent upon social and cultural positioning. (8)

This perspective is crucial to understanding the need for narrative strategies that subvert conventional and traditional narrative forms. These forms appear to have embodied within them—even if this may not always be the case—attitudes and assumptions that for many people, or for particular narrative purposes, simply do not apply.

For example, the experience of personal trauma—grief, or loss, for example—is often unable to be subdued to the requirements of conventional narrative. Even in Banville's *The Sea* there is a sense that the loss at the heart of the book is never fully articulated, partly because the narrative mode adopted by the novel prevents such articulation. This is not to criticise Banville or this work—and Banville may well have wanted to subdue his book's treatment of loss for fully defensible aesthetic reasons, in any case. Rather, it is to suggest that certain kinds of deeply subjective and difficult experiences need their own, hybrid narrative or poetic forms. They are simply not able to be fully registered in the modes and forms available to the writer using more conventional methods. Anne Whitehead (2004) in *Trauma Fiction* argues:

Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection. (3)

Moreover, the anxiety about Australian literature's place in the Western canon frequently manifests itself in the disjunctive; in the rupture and brokenness of disassociation and trauma, remembered and actual. For many Australian writers and poets, it is important that this is reflected in the form and style of their works, not just in its subject matter.

### **The prose poem as unconventional form**

One unconventional form that offers writers ways of sidestepping the forward-moving, teleological, time-conscious pressures of conventional narrative methods and the sense of closure so often associated with the traditional lyric is the prose poem (in saying this, we note that some contemporary lyric poems inhabit similar territory to the prose poem but, as Herrstein Smith comments, even in free verse poetry “the rhythm ... as it is reflected in and reinforced by its lineation, is experienced as an expectation of the recurrence of certain distribution patterns of formal features” (1968: 85-86)). The modern form of the prose poem was invented, as it were, by nineteenth century French writers trying to step away from a highly literary and conventional poetic culture that advocated strict and inhibiting rules of prosody—the ‘appropriate’ use of metre, rhyme, rhythm, lineation and the like.

Despite some sputtering starts, the prose poem form has taken a long time to find its home in the English language but there is now a resurgence in prose poetry across the English-speaking world. We have remarked elsewhere that the form of the prose poem

is Janus-faced, looking forwards and backwards, understanding transitions, providing passages and doorways. Space opens before and behind it, sometimes like closed rooms, sometimes like expanding fields. It

understands both prose and poetry ... Its problematising of generic distinctions may be what makes it most modern (and postmodern) and which may see it become a defining post-postmodern literary form. (2015: 14)

For this reason, prose poetry is a form suited to an expression of the Australian postcolonial disconnect. Bill Ashcroft (1989) argues that:

A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place. (8)

This extends to language as an expression of alienation, explored in the gaps, spaces and ambiguity that Australian prose poetry prioritises. Jen Webb's prose poems often feature landscapes of grief and absence. In this untitled prose poem, she discusses dislocation:

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

Webb declines to clearly tie significant phrases to the pronouns that open the poem. Is it the 'I' or the 'he' who did not "know [death] would happen"? This poem traverses grief and loss speedily and poignantly, and the brevity and pace of its prose poem rhythms open up a wide ground of consideration. It emphasises the importance of having a shared language and ready words.

A second prose poem, "The Site Visit," by Webb captures a contemporary sense of uncertainty and anxiety by presenting a simple-seeming situation in such a way that its implications ramify in many directions:

At the edge of the typhoon, the building moves the way large buildings do: uncomfortably. There are fifty foreign students on the loose. Through the misted windows they are taking snaps of the hazy city-scape. The images will be murk on murk on murk: someone should let them know. But it won't be me: my job is to count students back into the bus. When I do, two of them are missing. Forty minutes later they are missing still. Outside, on the street, someone is speaking urgent Mandarin into a phone. I count heads, and count again. Two short. Someone should make a decision. (2016b: n.pag.)

This prose poem opens *in medias res*, intensifying the confusion and dislocation it evokes.

There are two crises unfolding—a typhoon and the two missing students. The setting is surreal, a “hazy city-scape” of moving buildings, which is unrecognisable in photographs of the event: they “will be murk on murk on murk.” As anxiety sets in, so does a desperate sense of repetition and disconnection—most significantly, the ongoing “count[ing of] heads,” an idiom for checking that all the students have returned and, metaphorically, also a way of conjuring ideas of dislocation and even of decapitation.

These students are alienated by a series of barriers, most significantly, language. As “someone is speaking urgent Mandarin into a phone,” there is a common understanding of the situation’s gravity and seriousness, but misunderstanding, alienation and discomfort is pervasive. The final line “Someone should make a decision” is disturbing because of the failure of anyone to take responsibility for the lost students. There is eeriness in the suggestion that the students have not returned while the others sit on a bus “at the edge of the typhoon” taking photographs.

Webb uses the effect of the uncanny here to suggest that the sacred haunts the physical and psychological landscape. It is unclear where the prose poem is set, and the failure of the students to return from what appears to be an excursion in the unidentified place is intensely unsettling. Such “unsettlement” is a feature of much Australian writing. As Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs (1998) argue:

Let us take unsettlement—the kind of unsettlement that a claim on a sacred site or object can give rise to, for example—as a productive feature of the postcolonial landscape. It incites discourses and counter-discourses; it produces alignments and realignments; most of all, it reminds us that (whether we like it or not) ‘all of us’ are implicated to a greater or lesser degree in this modern predicament [concerning reconciliation]. (xvi)

Webb’s prose poem references a built landscape and foregrounds the notion that people are all implicated in the crisis of “this modern predicament,” as her work suggests that the specific crisis it refers to may speak to postmodernity’s anxieties more generally. Her prose poem even carries a suggestion that these students have been in some way sacrificial. In this sense, it is a moment weirdly reminiscent of Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

## **Prose poetry and “writing back” to the canon**

Salman Rushdie used the term “writing back” in a 1982 article (“The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance”) to discuss British imperialism and racism. It references the well-known Star Wars sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and was taken up by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in an early and major scholarly book on the status of postcolonial literature. In their discussion of the relevance of Rushdie’s phrase, Ashcroft et al. (2002) state:

Directly and indirectly ... the 'Empire writes back' to the imperial 'centre,' not only through nationalist assertion, proclaiming itself central and self-determining, but even more radically by questioning the bases of European and British metaphysics, challenging the world-view that can polarize centre and periphery in the first place. (32)

Importantly, they are emphatic in their argument that it is reductive to set up oppositions or adversity between non-European and European cultures; postcolonial literature should, instead, offer alternatives. This is a point that John Thieme addresses in his summary of responses to canonical literature. He states:

'Writing back', 'counter-discourse', 'oppositional literature', 'con-texts': these are some of the terms that have been used to identify a body of postcolonial works that take a classic English text as a departure point, *supposedly* as a strategy for contesting the authority of the canon of English literature. (2001: 1; emphasis ours)

While recent postcolonial scholarship encourages more expansive responses than this to European classics, there is undoubtedly a degree of antagonism in Australia towards the Western canon, not always tempered by discussions of alternatives. This partly stems from the fact that very few Australian authors have ever been 'canonised' by international literary critics—and some writers understandably resent this—and it partly comes from Australian writers increasingly wanting to speak with their own particular literary inflections. This has even led to restrictive arguments that the canon should not be imposed on Australian school children because of its tendency to legitimise patriarchy, racism and imperialism (M. Smith, 2014: n.pag.).

These are matters of dispute because, as Kate Flaherty (2016) argues, "A danger more dire than expecting students to learn to read them is precluding students from the playing space through a scholarly culture in which reading is about having your local experiences, preferences, and prejudices affirmed" (182). Breaking down colonialism's barriers in its postcolonial manifestations through imaginative action and innovation, rather than erecting new walls, is arguably a more productive way forward. Prose poetry is one way of taking this action in the sphere of creative writing; it is a flexible literary form in which postcolonial responses to the Western canon can be productively explored.

This is largely because prose poetry is a hybrid form that celebrates the blurring of boundaries, and is well suited to registering the kinds of experiences that are neither complete, nor fully coherent nor entirely resolvable. When Michael Chanan (2012) writes that "[c]olonial (and postcolonial) melancholy arises from an unresolvable contradiction within the (post)colonial subject" and that "colonial melancholy is a condition in which the concept of the nation is falsely embedded through the colonial relations" (92), one may apply such statements to the Australian context. Australia is an independent nation and yet many would argue that it is still in the process of finding ways to articulate an

identity that properly and sufficiently acknowledges its colonial past.

While postcolonial prose poetry has yet to attract much scholarly discussion, Jahan Ramazani (2017) argues that:

Postcolonial poets have arguably made profoundly important contributions to literature in English. They have hybridized European with indigenous forms, inventing new literary structures for cultural expression in lyric and experimental styles ... They have recast their cultural inheritances ... they have found new ways of aesthetically embodying, probing, and dramatizing the divisions and complexities of postcolonial worlds. (1)

Specifically, Australian prose poetry tends to prioritise spaces of uncertainty and anxiety to rework the Western canon, and make its own individual forms of utterance. Although considerable uncertainty and anxiety *already* exists in various canonical texts—in the novels of Virginia Woolf, for example—postcolonial anxiety is of a different order, and derives largely from circumstances specifically attendant on the postcolonial situation, and relating to ways in which one culture has dominated, transformed and compromised another. Sigrun Meinig expresses this succinctly: “[t]he interest of post-colonial criticism is in the pain, the atrocities, complexities, and the political consequences of colonialism and its aftermath” (2004: 26).

Although prose poetry is largely overlooked in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry* (2017) and Samuel Wagan Watson’s prose poem “Parallel Oz” is the only prose poem referenced in the Australian/New Zealand chapter, Wagan Watson is identified as a poet who “presents Australia as a place haunted by its own (denied) Indigeneity ... characteristically deforming popular culture to produce unsettling allegories of the politics of post/colonial Australia” (77). Importantly, the prose poem form of “Parallel Oz” (a work also published in 2012 under the title of “There’s No Place Like Home”) intensifies this haunting, not only because its slipperiness and hybridisation resist definition, but because of the pressing absence of line breaks in prose poetry which in this work are able to capture a sense of the pressing, almost claustrophobic nature of the postcolonial condition:

It’s the Lucky Country’s closet; a dark interior with frontier skeletons ... The yellow-brick road is pock-marked with massacre sites and the Wizard, the Wizard of Parallel Oz; he holds Dorothy hostage to a mutual obligation agreement. The Straw Man has the grazing monopoly, the Tin Man has the mines, and the lion waits in the spinifex, with the long-grass drinkers. (2012: n.pag.)

## **Intertextuality in Australian prose poems**

Intertextuality is a term introduced by Julia Kristeva in “Word, Dialogue and Novel”

(1966) where she states: “a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*” (85, original italics). While intertextuality has been accused of supporting canon formation because it tends to reference and therefore bolster texts already within the canon, the intertexts in Australian prose poetry often work subversively to playfully create a new narrative from ‘classic’ quotations. Canonical quotations (often British or American intertexts) and references appear as broken off from their original source and are re-assembled anew in the prose poems’ narratives.

For example, one of Cassandra Atherton’s (untitled) prose poems writes back to an Australian literary history built on British and American canonical texts, re-casting her intertexts in a meditation on betrayal. References are broken off from their original texts and manipulated into a new, fractured narrative highlighting the missing parts:

You draw hearts from the top left, like you are drawing Hemingway’s hills.  
Only the elephant is scarlet and hangs around my neck. In the throbbing hotel room I open my mouth for your tongue but you speckle kisses over the shadows between my breasts. Twilight bisects my left side from my right. I can’t speak. All I can think of is ‘please, please’. A triad without its final note.  
(2016: n.pag)

This brief work covers considerable terrain—conjuring ideas of broken identity within an intimate relationship, and an associated rupture in thought. The literary works it alludes to—Hemingway’s short story “Hills Like White Elephants;” Coleridge’s poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner;” and Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter*—help to charge this prose poem with a great deal of condensed and not fully resolvable meaning.

In Hemingway’s short story, his female character is being told by her lover to terminate her pregnancy. He repeatedly tells her that the operation “is perfectly simple” (Hemingway, 1987: 213), and in this gesture that takes the form of an apparent reassurance, Hemingway emphasises her vulnerability and the precariousness of her situation. Atherton connects Hemingway’s image of hills as like elephants to Coleridge’s albatross, symbol of bad luck, bad faith and damaged fate in the way the elephant is “hang[ing] around [the narrator’s] neck.” What’s more, the inferred albatross is scarlet in colour and references Hawthorne’s scarlet letter, signifying adultery and the breaking of patriarchy’s social and sexual taboos. Indeed, the “hills” in this prose poem are likened to the top section of a heart; a shape never completed like the missing note in the final “triad.”

The form of this prose poem—the movement of its ideas—is also fractured, signalling that the intimacy it depicts is problematic and tainted. The inclusion of direct speech which is thought rather than spoken, and the statement “I can’t speak” references and recasts Hemingway’s character’s request to “please stop talking” (Hemingway, 1987: 214), and also gestures to Australia’s unspoken history, in which women and Indigenous Australians have so often not been permitted a voice (the history which, with specific

reference to Indigenous peoples, W.E.H. Stanner (1968) called the Great Australian Silence).

Paul Hetherington's prose poem entitled "Antiquities" alludes to Jane Austen's *Emma* and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*:

Within the restrictions of our common knowledge, spaces began to breathe—this courtyard in the city; that old quadrangle of orange trees; the pathway leading to a river bed with pebbles congregating like shiny vowels; the long slope where grassland furs a hill. We surveyed sunflowers in nodding conversations and admired antiquities: 'Harriet Smith was the natural daughter of somebody'; 'It was plump, one afternoon, in the middle of my very hour'. We gathered them like a form of ardency, finding our own inflections in these words. Among our vernacular phrases, the nineteenth century murmured in our ears. (2016: n.pag.)

This prose poem prioritises "words" and "inflections" and in two intertextual moments recasts the references to these classic texts, finding resonances in their contiguity for a contemporary reader. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the Austen quotation—"Harriet Smith was the natural daughter of somebody"—with the James quotation—"It was plump, one afternoon, in the middle of my very hour"—changes their original meaning and introduces a splintered twenty-first century "conversation" between these disparate quotations. They haunt the prose poem, inflecting its meanings and offering different kinds of narrativisation, amounting to more than just a juxtapositioning of fragments.

In *Emma*, Harriet Smith is presented as illegitimate and struggles to finish a full sentence or know her own mind. Her dialogue is full of dashes and broken thoughts, for example, when Mr Martin proposes she states:

Oh! no, I am sure you are a great deal too kind to—but if you would just advise me what I had best do—No, no, I do not mean that—As you say, one's mind ought to be quite made up—One should not be hesitating—It is a very serious thing.—It will be safer to say 'No' perhaps.—Do you think I had better say 'No?' (Austen, 1999: 33)

In this way, Harriet's illegitimacy and fragmented speech defer meaning. Cleverly, Hetherington is questioning and playing with concepts of authenticity, his use of a single line from the text further fractures meaning, but in a postmodern approach that prioritises spuriousness and simulacra.

Further, Hetherington's use of the quotation from *The Turn of the Screw*, parodies the canon in its referencing of Shakespeare, who is at its centre:

When the Governess in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* sees her first ghost, that of the wicked valet Peter Quint, the words she uses to describe the

event—which initially persuades her that her ‘imagination’ has ‘turned real’, in the person of her handsome employer—are words in which *Hamlet* is remembered. (Miller, 1987: n.pag.)

Thus, these canonical authors’ words inform Hetherington’s prose poem in a variety of ways, and juxtaposing them in this revisionistic technique encourages a perspective of multiple viewpoints. As he recontextualises British and American texts that provide a literary inheritance for Australian writing, Hetherington urges us to “find ... our own inflections in these words.”

Overall, these prose poems by Atherton and Hetherington—like Jen Webb’s works discussed in the previous section—demonstrate the way in which prose poetry inhabits an in-between and yet widely suggestive space between traditional narrative prose and conventional lyric poetry. This hybrid and unsettled form opens up shifting ground in which the unresolvable nature of so much experience is embodied in condensed fragments of poetic language, all of them gesturing towards a greater and often postcolonial narrative that, they imply, is otherwise unreachable or inexpressible—or expressible only in fragments.

Unlike conventional lyric poems with their formal containment and closed faces, the prose poem form remains remarkably open and continually suggestive. Unlike conventional narrative prose, the prose poems’ condensed narrative gestures imply other simultaneous and sometimes hidden narratives. They emphasise the multivalency of human subjectivity and its frequently unstable complexities.

## **Conclusion**

We may not all wish to speak in prose poetry all of the time—such conversations would be hard work. However, prose poetry as a significant hybrid form is one avenue for bridging the divide between our desire for narrative, lyric coherence and reassurance and the less polished and finished subjectivities we know. Our awareness of these subjectivities tells us a great deal about what it is to be human in the twenty-first century. Prose poetry as a form speaks to this humanity in its fragmentation, contradictions, irresolutions and intensities. Prose poetry is particularly well suited to articulating some of the conundrums and indeterminacies associated in contemporary Australia with an awareness of postcolonialism and the issues this poses for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike.

For Samuel Wagan Watson, the prose poem form is a way of speaking back directly to a nation where many Indigenous Australians still inhabit what feels like an alternative or “parallel” reality. Wagan Watson’s adaptation of tropes from the film *The Wizard of Oz* speaks back directly, ironically and with postmodern verve to mainstream Australian (and American) culture, while poems by Webb, Atherton and Hetherington all find modes of

authentic poetic utterance through foregrounding ways in which language in its various forms and contexts is both impediment to and enabler of communication.

Margueritte S. Murphy (1992) argues that:

The prose poem is potentially or formally 'postmodern' according to Lyotard's definition: 'the unrepresentable in presentation itself'. As a form that is by necessity a subversion of other prose forms, a form that finds its identity negatively, the prose poem never predicts its 'future' as text or genre. (170)

All of the prose poems discussed approach their articulations of difficult circumstances through a hybridised form that has the capacity to invent itself as it goes and to make powerful use of intertextual references in defining simultaneously condensed and expansive preoccupations. In sitting outside of canonised generic categories, and in making a virtue of fragmentariness, these prose poems have a freedom to speak against traditional and conventional literary forms if they choose to do so.

Conventional literary forms continue to offer a great deal to readers, and many brilliant works, such as John Banville's *The Sea*, continue to be written in such forms. However, in acknowledging that there are also other ways of speaking and of understanding one another—including through open and to some extent undecidable literary forms such as the prose poem—so new possibilities may be conjured, and ways found for postcolonial identities to be more truly and fully articulated.

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**Paul Hetherington** is Professor of Writing in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra and head of the International Poetry Studies Institute there. He has published twelve full-length collections of poetry, most recently *Burnt Umber* (UWAP, 2016) and *Íkaros* (RWP, 2017). He won the 2014 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards (poetry); was commended in the 2016 Newcastle Poetry Prize and shortlisted for the 2017 Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry. He undertook an Australia Council for the Arts Literature Board Residency at the BR Whiting Studio in Rome in 2015-16. He edited the final three volumes of the National Library of

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Australia's authoritative four-volume edition of the diaries of the artist Donald Friend and is a founding editor of the international online journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*.

**Cassandra Atherton** is an award-winning writer, academic and critic. She was a Harvard Visiting Scholar in English in 2015-16 sponsored by Stephen Greenblatt and was a Visiting Fellow at Sophia University, Tokyo in 2014. Her most recent books of prose poetry are *Trace* (2015), *Exhumed* (2015) and *Pika-don* (2017) and she was recently awarded a VicArts grant and Australia Council grant for her prose poetry on the atomic bomb. Cassandra is the current poetry editor of *Westerly Magazine* and is writing a book, *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* with Paul Hetherington for Princeton University Press.