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THE WEIGHT OF AN EMPTY ROOM

La fantaisie and gap gardening in a prose poetry sequence

Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington

1. Fragmentation and Gap Gardening

Very little is known about Louis-Jacques-Napoléon Bertrand, whose literary pseudonym was Aloysius Bertrand. His biography consists of a series of fragments pieced together and is recited in scholarship and various encyclopedias. He was born on 20 April 1807 in Ceva, Piedmont, Italy and died when he was 34 years old on 29 April 1841 in Paris. In 1815 his family moved to Dijon, an ancient city that fascinated Bertrand, where he studied at the Collège Royal from 1818 to 1826. He contributed literary works to a local newspaper, which he managed, and — following a letter from Victor Hugo — travelled to Paris in 1828. There he met a variety of literary figures, including the poet Émile de Saint-Amand Deschamps and the famous literary critic, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve. Failing to establish himself among the Paris literati, he returned to Dijon and became involved once more with newspaper publishing. His journalism reflected his strong Republican views. In 1833 he returned to Paris and probably in that year completed *Gaspard de la nuit* — Keith Waldrop says it was ‘written over a period of years’ (Baudelaire 2009: xi) — as well as a play, *Peter Waldeck ou la chute d’un homme*. He proposed unsuccessfully to a woman named Célestine. From 1835 to 1837 he borrowed a considerable amount of money before contracting tuberculosis, becoming seriously ill. He was hospitalised for extended periods and eventually died of the combined effects of the disease and starvation. His groundbreaking *Gaspard* was published posthumously in 1842 in an error-filled volume, selling 20 copies.

Between the sketchy details and tantalising fragments of Bertrand’s biography, there are numerous gaps. These may be left as they are or filled with information deduced from Bertrand’s literary works, or with speculation. Even if such information is included, Bertrand’s biography remains full of mystery and is notable for its brevity and missing parts. It is a series of fragments of a life rather than any sort of whole, posing questions and suggesting many unresolved issues. As a result, David Carl’s statement that ‘[f]ragmentary works ... simultaneously seek and avoid closure, completion, and totality [and are] driven by the oldest of literary tropes: that of the journey or voyage, the quest’ (2000: 25) may be applied to the record of Bertrand’s life — even if any quest to find the author behind *Gaspard de la nuit* is almost certain to fail.

Yet Bertrand is an important writer. Almost every version of his skeleton biography acknowledges in one way or another that ‘Bertrand’s *Gaspard de la nuit* represents the first conscious attempt to write prose poetry’ (Slott 1985: 69). Despite this significant achievement, and for good reasons, the chief scholarly focus of discussions about the nineteenth-century French tradition’s important inauguration of the contemporary prose poem is Baudelaire’s *Spleen de Paris* or *Petits Poems en prose* (*Paris Spleen*),

and also writers such as Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé. Indeed, while Bertrand's *Gaspard* has provided other artists with inspiration across many artforms, Dana Milstein observes that,

[d]espite Maurice Ravel's piano pieces [*Gaspard de la nuit: Trois poèmes pour piano d'après Aloysius Bertrand*], Antonio Giacometti's guitar suite and an adapted performance by the New York City Ballet, today Bertrand's name and texts remain virtually unknown, save a brief and ambivalent homage made by Baudelaire in the preface to his *Petits poèmes en prose*. (2003: 137–38)

Baudelaire wrote in this preface: 'the idea came to me to try something analogous [to *Gaspard de la nuit*], applying to the description of modern life — or, rather, to a *certain* modern and more abstract life — the procedure he [Bertrand] applied in painting a life long gone, strangely picturesque' (2009: 3). Marvin N Richards notes that Baudelaire's ambivalence about Bertrand may well be because, 'in order for his own project to be original, [Baudelaire] had to deny the importance of Bertrand' (Richards 1998: 543) but it may also be true that Baudelaire's somewhat equivocal assessment of *Gaspard de la nuit* accurately reflected his views of the work's merits.

Thus, Bertrand's major creative achievement is to some extent overshadowed by those who subsequently made creative use of his example and innovations. The numerous gaps in Bertrand's biography remind one that he has never received the kind of attention that would enable a fuller biographical narrative. We have argued elsewhere that one of the key features of prose poetry is that it 'may be viewed as a contemporary development of the possibilities of the poetic fragment, so beloved of the Romantic writers' (Hetherington and Atherton 2020: 23) and Marvin Richards has also argued that prose poetry is '[a]t once whole and standing alone ... [that it is] incomplete and stand[s] for a greater whole' (1998: 15). In this light, if one twins Bertrand's fragmented biography with his early and crucially important attempts at a new literary form — prose poetry — the result is a sense that not only is fragmentation the dominant feature of his life and work but, by extension, the main texts associated with him are stubbornly resistant to completion and closure.

We have been prompted by the sense of incompleteness and openness in Bertrand's life and work to write a book length sequence of prose poetry. Our approach may be understood in terms of Rosmarie Waldrop's suggestive phrase, 'gap gardening' (2016: 157), which provides a way of understanding and transforming textual gaps and spaces and encourages an associated interrogation of language and meaning. Dan Chiasson teases out these ideas, stating that 'gap gardening':

asserts its meaning by undoing itself. The 'gaps' between words ('gap' and 'gardening,' for example) are, for Waldrop, the fruitful regions, the zones of transformation and possibility. Depending on how we take the phrase, the 'gap' is either the ground that poets 'garden' in or the crop that they eventually reap. The action of a poem (its 'gardening') is to transform the gaps, possibly into more gaps ... In nature, nothing can come from nothing, but in language it happens all the time. (2016: n.p.)

In exploring both the proliferation, hollowness and exponential possibilities of gaps and spaces, our book-length prose poetry sequence, *The Weight of an Empty Room*, speculates on the existence of an elusive lover for Bertrand. It also shifts what we call the 'Bertrand narrative' to the Moulin Rouge, which becomes a contemporary setting for the staging of a fantasia,^[1] somewhat like *Gaspard de la nuit* itself.

The subtitle of *Gaspard de la nuit* includes the word *Fantaisies* and, as Dana Milstein argues,

Bertrand's use of the word *Fantaisie* in the subtitle is another adoption from artistic terminology. In painting and music, *fantaisie* denotes a work in which the artist's caprice and imagination take precedence over stylistic rules; the painter/composer is left to treat his subject matter liberally without respecting traditional approaches. (2003: 139)

The Weight of an Empty Room engages with Bertrand's sense of *fantaisie* by conceiving of the prose poem as a form of stage and studio. It also uses the fantastical elements of the Moulin Rouge cabaret shows as the backdrop to the contemporary reimagining of *Gaspard de la Nuit* — a work that evokes many of its own fantastical moments:

II. The Angel and the Fairy

A fairy hides herself in everything you see.

Victor Hugo.

This night a fairy perfumes my slumber full of chimeras with the most refreshing and the tenderest breathings of July, that same good fairy who plants again in his path the walking stick of the blind old man bewildered without it, and that same good fairy who wipes away the tears, and assuages the suffering, of the little gleaner girl whose bare foot a thorn has wounded. (Bertrand 2004: Kindle reference 2688)

By exploring *fantaisie* and its connection to reality — or questioning what is present and what is absent — our prose poetry sequence poses the question of whether, in one sense, Bertrand is not more alive as a fictional presence than as a biographical figure. In this way, *The Weight of an Empty Room* interprets Waldrop's idea of gap gardening as an opportunity not only for the proliferation of potential meanings but as an invitation to extend and enrich the possible gaps and spaces of Bertrand's life.

2. Rooms and Spaces

Prose poems are often visually identifiable by their ubiquitous box shape. This has led to their comparison to a variety of rectangular objects such as postcards, photographs, lunchboxes, windows, frames, bricks, presents, pillows, cages, coffins, suitcases, rooms and houses — all things associated with the quotidian which help to lend the prose poem a sense of familiarity. In particular, the comparison of poetry to rooms is identifiable in the meaning of the word 'stanza' — which, in Italian means both room and an aggregated group of lines within a poem, usually divided by line breaks. While stanzas are units in lineated poetry and the word 'stanzagraph' (Miltner qtd in Sabol, 2012: n.p.) for prose poetry has not become a popular term, we have argued that '[t]his comparison between prose poems and houses draws attention to the similarity between the prose poem's rectangular shape on the page and the act of looking from above at a room's plan. In this way, prose poems may be viewed as contained and restrictive "rooms" that "contain," and are able to release, significant effects related to condensed language, poetic imagery, "open" linguistic spaces, and a ramifying suggestiveness' (Hetherington and Atherton 2020: 85).

The prose poetry anthologies, *The House of Your Dream: An international collection of prose poetry* (2018) and *A Curious Architecture: A selection of contemporary prose poems* (1996), and the journal of

prose poetry and flash fiction, *Double Room* — also the title of a prose poem by Baudelaire — refer to this connection. Indeed, the metaphor of the prose poem as room can also be extended to blueprints, floor plans, building plans, and aerial views of houses and other dwellings. In Donna Stonecipher's discussion of 'prose poetry as ontologically urban, as uniquely expressive of urban experience' (2017: 4), the prose poem is both an urban architectural plan and cityscape. In addition to exploring the prose poem as stage and studio, our sequence, *The Weight of an Empty Room* explores it as *la camera* — the bedroom — as a setting for experiences of *fantaisie*.

In *Boxing Inside the Box: Women's prose poetry*, Holly Iglesias critiques 'the confinement of gender construction' in her comparison of the prose poetry box to 'pressure cooker, sand box, sanctuary, laboratory, dungeon, treasure chest' (2004: 15) and, importantly, draws attention to the use of the word 'box' as a slang term for the vagina. Waldrop's gap gardening could also be read as a reclamation of two slang terms for vagina (gap and lady garden) that, together, emphasise fruitfulness and transformation rather than lack. She states:

Perhaps the greatest challenge of the prose poem ... is to compensate for the absence of the [right-hand] margin ... I cultivate cuts, discontinuity, leaps, shifts of reference, etc. 'Gap gardening,' I have called it, and my main tool for it is collage. (Waldrop qtd in Ramke n.d.: n.p.)

Moreover, gap gardening has been discussed as being 'beyond gender' or as 'a (gender-) neutral space within which to decenter infusion of space and objects with heterosexual implication' (Dewey 2016: n.p.) We use this relocation of space to place the gendered body under pressure and explore the transformative possibilities of *fantaisie*. In this way, we combine Iglesias's and Waldrop's philosophies of prose poetry in a contemporary reimagining of Bertrand's unnamed lover, the presence of whom is no more than a series of vague and tantalising hints in *Gaspard de la nuit*. More generally, Slott has asserted, 'It is important to determine whether Gaspard is indeed a parody of romanticism or just an example of the complex use of romantic irony' in which 'Bertrand simultaneously uses and refuses romantic lyricism' (Slott 1985: 70 and 69). In our case, we have employed some of the ironic tropes available to the invocation of the lyric present in contemporary poetry and have also used the backdrop of the Moulin Rouge as a way of exploring various questions about the place of romanticism and romantic tropes in modern society, while also conjuring Bertrand's lover as a character who is at once both flesh and blood and a ghostly literary figuration.

After '[e]ncountering the engravings of Jacques Callot and Rembrandt' (Milstein 2003: 138), Bertrand subtitled *Gaspard de la nuit: Fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot*. In *The Weight of an Empty Room*, the characterisation of the female protagonist as a dancer in the chorus at the Moulin Rouge is the primary device enabling the rectangular prose poem to be read as a kind of literary stage — and while this might not directly relate to Callot's and Rembrandt's techniques in their etchings, Milstein argues that Bertrand's 'aesthetic objective is to rescind traditional relationships between original and copy, and to annihilate barriers imposed between the author, text, and reader' (2003: 138). Bertrand's *fantaisies* incorporate and to some extent replicate ideas drawn from Callot and Rembrandt while transforming and repurposing them.

We attempt something similar in our prose poetry sequence, focusing on the figure of the chorine as an example of what we term a real simulacrum — a way of both representing and challenging ideas of original and copy. The chorine figure may be understood as both original and copy at once as she responds in her particular way to the need for dancers in the chorus at the Moulin Rouge to strive for sameness and uniformity. They wear the same costumes, hairstyles and make-up; they must meet strict

guidelines for height and build; and the movements of the chorus as a whole are orchestrated so that dancers' individual identities are subsumed within the overall choreography of the dance and the general, desirable collective 'persona' of the chorus. The following statement from the Moulin Rouge webpage is instructive:

Serious dance training with a good classical base and advanced modern / jazz.

Minimum height female dancers: 175cm/5'9 | Minimum height male dancers: 185cm / 6'1. A slim graceful figure for the girls and well-proportioned muscled body for the boys. Great stage presence and bright personality. (Moulin Rouge n.d.: n.p.)

As theatrical counterparts to the corps de ballet (or body of the ballet), Moulin Rouge's chorus dancers similarly 'work mostly in a group, undifferentiated from one another... [and, indeed,] [i]n some 19th-century ballets the corps women are deliberately identical figures' (Sulcas 2007: n.p.). Chorus dancers are trained to dance the same steps, often at the same time, so that they appear almost as carbon copies. In this way, the stage becomes an illuminated rectangle of illusion. Jean Baudrillard argues that illusion may be understood 'not as simulacrum or unreality, but as something which drives a breach into a world that is too known, too déjà vu, too conventional, too real' (1998: 71) — and the strange, tantalising, choreographed uniformity of the Moulin Rouge drives such a breach into conventional notions of the 'real'. In *The Weight of an Empty Room* the illusion, dreams and nightmares of *Gaspard de la nuit* are re-interpreted through a cabaret show at the Moulin Rouge.

3. Prose Poetry and Breath in the COVID-19 pandemic

In order to link ideas of fantaisie and identity, we decided to locate many of the prose poems in *The Weight of an Empty Room* in the female protagonist's home. As part of our research, we found a Parisian studio apartment advertised on a real estate website that would be affordable on a dancer's wage and which is a short commute to the Moulin Rouge. We set many of the poems in this compact space, exploring *la camera* as part of the common living area in a studio. Here, the prose poem functions as a kind of 'everyday boudoir', demonstrating that intimacy and sexual relations may play out in various intense ways when not spatially separated from other parts of life. In this respect, the prose poem box becomes a way of mirroring the rectangular studio in which kitchen, sofa, bedroom, bed — and pillow — all exist in one space in a series of relatively uninterrupted relationships. Treating this apartment metaphorically in our writing enables a kind of upfront intimacy where words butt up against one another like the conjoined areas of the studio apartment.



We have suggested elsewhere that a prose poem by Kate North:

invokes, activates, and personifies the chronotope of the house, both in its form of the prose poem—in looking at the work, one can imagine a view of three rooms and a connecting passageway ... It is as if breathing within the house permits it a kind of creaturely life [yet] ... the prose poem operates in, and accentuates its sense of, a claustrophobic TimeSpace' (Hetherington and Atherton, 2020: 143).

Conceiving of many of the prose poems in our sequence as analogous to a one-roomed studio intensifies this sense of constriction and shallow breathing, and is in contrast to the deeper breathing of so much lineated poetry. Lineated poems usually encourage a pause or breath at the end of each line — and even around the complete text of poems, situated as they are in a field of white space — whereas the prose-poem-as-studio's sentences run right up to and wrap at the right margin, disallowing any sense of expansiveness.

Abigail Beckel and Donna Stonecipher are two of the most convincing scholars on the concept of breath and breathing in prose poetry. Beckel's description of the prose poem's 'breathless gallop of words' and 'onrushing momentum' (2010: n.p.) and Stonecipher's discussion of how 'open space' functions as a 'space to breathe' (2017: 76) provide important commentaries on the way in which prose poems squeeze everything together. As a result, and although small breaths may be snatched between sentences, the only fully released breath is possible at the end of the work when the prose poem opens out into the white space that follows the final sentence. This restricted opportunity to breathe deeply is also relevant to dancers. In many dance routines there is very little opportunity for deep and relaxed breathing until a routine concludes. In this way, one may link the various confined spaces of the prose poem, the studio apartment and dance routines and, for these reasons, we wanted to include a range of

references to breath and breathing in *The Weight of an Empty Room*, connected to the way pressure builds in the chest when deep breathing is not possible.

Furthermore, during the period we undertook research, the COVID-19 pandemic began. As is well known, the virus often attacks the respiratory system, making breathing difficult. In serious cases, people are put on respirators and given oxygen — and there is the risk that they may die from respiratory failure. Given that Bertrand died from tuberculosis intensified by starvation, the pandemic provided further impetus to incorporate references to breathing in our sequence — along with disparate imagery which, like a kind of poetic furniture, is often jammed together in our prose poems' close quarters. In keeping with these preoccupations, we refer to the way the Moulin Rouge was shut down on 12 March 2020 and their dancers were required to continue rehearsing at home, usually in their small Parisian apartments. One commented on the difficulty of '[w]orking out in my small 30 square-metre (apartment)' (Lacsina 2020: n.p.).

As *The Weight of an Empty Room* emphasises intimacy, an abiding sense of claustrophobia and breathlessness in its re-imagination of the relationship between Bertrand and his young lover, so the prose poems that voice various exchanges between the lovers feature words such as 'wheezing', 'squeezed' and 'clenching'. This not only helps to focus the sequence's main themes, but it also relates to the ways in which the rhythms of breathing and the variability of the heartbeat inform the experience of reading prose poetry:

[I write]

In my small room, your hands are shadowy spiders on my skin, running over me time and again. Can breath travel half the world to meet in our separate rooms? I sense warmth on my neck, smell your toothpaste's mintiness. There are surprises of light, like blurs of the known. Your returning words expand, as if you might be uttering your tight, clenching sentences again. Yet the weight of space jemmies us. I sing those lyrics we composed.

She writes

Your heartbeat is under these floorboards, in this wide, orange room that looks toward the Eiffel Tower. I drop a marble and watch it run across twisted timber — as decades ago you did — laughing at the wood's curl and torque. Your ghost taps my body with the force of a reflex hammer — that striking involuntariness we knew; the wheezing of wood and dust as evening squeezed and closed. Later, in darkness, your image catches between eyelashes. We are lying on the Persian carpet, levitating over pine. (Revised versions of Atherton and Hetherington 2021: n.p.)

In an appeal to gap gardening, *fantaisie* is cultivated in the gaps and spaces in these prose poems via intertextuality. There is a Poe-esque 'heartbeat under these floorboards' and a fairy-tale-like 'Persian carpet' where the lovers are 'levitating over pine'. Additionally, a sense of the uncanny pervades the works, expressed in phrases such as 'blurs of the known'. Coupled with the images of 'shadowy spiders on my skin, / running over me time and time again' and '[y]our ghost tapp[ing] my body', an uncomfortable sense of insufficiency or foreboding rushes in on the reader. The final two sentences of the first poem juxtapose weight and lightness, so when 'weight of space' begins to act as a jemmy, energy is suddenly released and becomes transformed into weightless, sung lyrics. These are both a

comfort and an indication of how the characters in these works are often grasping at absence and thin air.

It is also important to note that in the story world of *Gaspard de la Nuit*, Bertrand is not said to be the author of the work:

Gaspard de la Nuit is presented as the work ... of the diabolical 'monomane' Gaspard de la Nuit, who, we learn in a liminary note signed by Bertrand, accosts him on the streets of Dijon and thrusts the manuscript on him ... Having received Gaspard's 'grimoire' (spellbook), Bertrand tells us, he feels compelled to publish it. (Marmarelli 2005: 71–2)

We decided to compose some of our prose poetry sequence as epistles that pay tribute to this 'grimoire' and also address — sometimes obliquely, sometimes more directly — the question of authorship in Bertrand's text. As the male protagonist becomes ill, the authenticity of the prose poem epistles and who wrote them — or who is writing them — may be examined by the reader. This questioning constitutes — or may be construed as — metatextual moments that problematise the nature of the fictional world and relationships depicted in *The Weight of an Empty Room*. As this problematisation happens it also questions the relationship of a notional, fictional or putative 'biography' to the 'real'.

For example, the prose poems below — headed 'She writes' and '[I write]' — may be read as correspondence between lovers or the deluded imaginings of a feverish mind as the narrator becomes ill. The references to not 'sleep[ing] well', a 'sleeping silhouette' and a 'room ... walled in words and arms' open up both possibilities — they could refer either to the experience of jetlag and the expressions of lovers who are separated; or they may well be hallucinatory experiences:

She writes

I didn't sleep well. Your breathing's familiar rhythm haunts me here. I stare past your sleeping silhouette — yes, I see it — to the horizon's lights. I have lost our sense of synchronicity: you disturb me every night. Do you remember the floor-to-ceiling window where the moon gathered the wind-varnished sky?

[I write]

My room becomes an idea of a different room. Empty space has collared me and your words open our old opacities — each puzzling at the other's meaning. The room is walled in words and arms. A faint light hesitates, as if through drawn blinds. I'm hemmed in, like an injunction—but what holds in memory's cycling spaces? Here are dull right angles. Here is cold plaster meeting my hands. (Revised versions of Atherton and Hetherington 2021: n.p.)

In these works, the trope of breathing is disrupted and its rhythm becomes asynchronous. This asynchronicity is explored in the ideas of being 'haunt[ed]' by another; the invocation of an absent other's 'familiar rhythm'; and, most explicitly, in references to 'lost ... synchronicity', 'disturb[ance]', and 'cycling spaces'. While there is potential romance in open spaces, a 'floor-to-ceiling window' and the expanse of a 'wind-varnished sky', these poems question what the reality behind such tropes may be. The question that ends the prose poem entitled 'She writes' also opens the poem out into a space bigger than itself. Yet, even this idea of the sky is juxtaposed by the idea of containment; of someone being oppressively squeezed in their accommodation. The 'cold plaster meeting my hands' becomes the moment where the poem's persona pushes back on an immurement that may allude to the

constrictions of a room, the oppression of memory, the constrained spaces of the prose poem itself, the historical death and immurement of Bertrand, the absence of the ‘grimoire’ — or all of these things at once.

The Weight of An Empty Room is both a contemporary re-imagining of Aloysius Bertrand and his relationship with an unnamed, elusive lover and also a way of quizzing the way biography may be constructed and understood. Through using a combination of Waldrop’s gap gardening and Iglesias’s feminist frame, this prose poetry sequence exploits some of the ramifications and negations of silence, reinterpreting *Gaspard de la nuit* as a choreographic fantasia for the page in which suggestion is often given priority over fact. The prose poetry sequence becomes studio, stage and boudoir and, as this prose poetry sequence fleshes out a fantasia of Bertrand’s life, it repurposes the question once posed by Baudelaire: ‘Which of us has not, in his ambitious days, dreamt the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm [i.e. metre] or rhyme, supple enough and striking enough to suit lyrical movements of the soul, undulations of reverie, the flip-flops of consciousness?’ (2009: 3). The prose poem becomes a way of understanding language and its many, sometimes conflicting, representations of a life.

[1] We have retained the French spelling of the word ‘fantaisie’ to mean creative imagination and fancy.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington

Cassandra Atherton is a widely anthologised and award-winning prose poet and scholar of prose poetry. She was a Harvard Visiting Scholar in English and a Visiting Fellow at Sophia University. She co-authored *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (Princeton University Press, 2020) and co-edited the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (Melbourne University Press, 2020). She is associate editor at MadHat Press (USA) and Professor of Writing and Literature at Deakin University.

Paul Hetherington is a distinguished Australian poet who has won or been nominated for over thirty national and international awards and competitions and is Professor of Writing at the University of Canberra, head of the International Poetry Studies Institute and founder of the International Prose Poetry Group. He is co-author of *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

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