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Erasure and gift: Alan Loney's prose poetry

Abstract:

Characteristics of the prose poem emphasised by Stephen Fredman include a focus on language for its own sake, openness and the employment of the long poem. These facets are strongly present in Alan Loney's prose poem sequences 'The erasure tapes' (1994) and 'Gifts' (2005). The paper argues that these concepts are intimately connected. It evaluates the link between prose poetry and postmodernism and between language and the idea of open writing as it relates to postmodernism and its appropriation of the long poem. The erasure in question in Loney's masterwork could be that of memory, meaning, or connection; yet meaning and connectivity are handled differently in the long poem form, and build sense and connection in different ways, through juxtaposition, accumulation and the questioning of perspective in the individual's response to language and its unavoidable wedding with memory. The prose poem offers a diversity of tools and structures, via the sentence and sentence fragment, supremely useful for practitioners of poetry who wish to extend their range.

Biographical note:

Owen Bullock recently completed a PhD in creative writing at the University of Canberra. His research interests are semiotics and poetry, prose poetry, collaboration, and haikai literature, and his scholarly work has appeared in *Axon: Creative Explorations*, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, *New Writing*, *Qualitative Inquiry* and *TEXT*. His creative publications include *River's edge* (2016), *A Cornish story* (2010) and *Sometimes the sky isn't big enough* (2010). He has edited a number of journals and anthologies, including *Poetry New Zealand*. Two new collections of his poetry are forthcoming in 2017: *Semi* (Puncher & Wattmann) and *Work & play* (Recent Work Press).

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Stephen Fredman and prose poetry

Critics tend to agree on lineation as the defining feature of the free verse poem (Frank and Sayre 1988: ix–x; Perloff 1998: 116–17; Hartman 1980: 11); its absence is then a decisive indicator for the prose poem, at least from the point of view of poetry. As it stands, the term 'prose poem' is problematic and can be seen to privilege poetry, since the arrangement of the modifying 'prose' is subordinate to poetry. Stephen Fredman, writing in *Poet's prose – the crisis in American verse*, resists the term 'prose poem' because it is an oxymoron and because it fails to let go of the connection with French surrealism (Fredman 1983: vii).[1] These are fair points, yet his term 'poet's prose' obviously did not take on. TS Eliot's term 'short fiction' seems to have had too much of the lingering narrative to it. The recent term 'flash fiction' is similarly focussed and descriptive. Perhaps 'prose poem' has endured simply because it is an oxymoron, much like 'free verse'.

The formalists understood the evolution of literature as disrupting existing conventions and generating new ones (Rivkin and Ryan 2004: 4). This basic assumption has endured and developed, incorporating the understanding that a text generates and subverts meaning at the same time (Johnson 2004: 341). Furthermore, Kristeva believes that poetry confronts order, the logic of language and even the idea of the state (Kristeva 1984: 80). Any new form may constitute a revolution against accepted norms. In the last 25 years, commentators have stressed the 'subversive potential' of the prose poem (Delville 1998: 10; Murphy 1992).

Fredman argues that the writing of prose poetry could involve a massive relinquishing of prestige (1983: 6). The negative reaction that the prose poem sometimes garners is intriguing and perhaps an unavoidable side-effect of any re-examination of prosody,[2] but one which sits well with postmodernist aesthetics and techniques. There is a further link between free verse and prose poetry. Not only do they share a similar history (in relation to postmodernism), but Hartman reminds us that a more accurate translation of 'vers libre' is probably 'free line' (Hartman 1980: 10); in this case, the line is liberated not just from metrical rules, but from itself.

Despite Fredman's term 'poet's prose' becoming lost in literary history, he makes a number of astute observations of what is more often described as prose poetry; I will use the more common terms 'prose poem' and 'prose poetry', for ease of communication. But I will pursue his ideas of a focus on language for its own sake, openness and the employment of the long poem in connection with Alan Loney's prose poem sequences 'The erasure tapes' (from the book of the same name, 1994) and 'Gifts' (from *Fragmenta nova*, 2005). Loney is a New Zealand poet who published seven collections in New Zealand before moving to Melbourne in the late nineties. He is a letterpress artist and book designer and founded several presses and journals.

In more recent times, the prose poem has been described as a self-evident option for the poet, and perhaps even a form rather than a genre (Smith 2014: 9–10). This easy acceptance of the prose poem perhaps evokes the approach taken by Loney who created one of his most convincing works in this form over twenty years ago. He seems to take it in his stride as just one experiment with form among many in a collection composed of three sections: of lineated poems which make regular use of stepped lines, prose

poetry, and double column poetry. One reviewer praised the way these sections formed a kind of conversation, despite some concerns about obscurity of meaning in the eponymous prose poem (Wilson 1995: 71). Loney's work demonstrates an admirable openness on the part of the practitioner.

Fredman suggests that the prose poem is explorative, even investigative – which are qualities of open writing. It embraces the world of ideas and the techniques of prose; these borrowings 'may be seen as central to our time, a moment in which poetry, philosophy, and criticism begin to coalesce' (Fredman 1983: 10). Instead of the line, the sentence carries the genre, and with it the possibility of the sentence fragment, familiar in the work of contemporary novelists from James Joyce to Edna O'Brien. Fredman discusses the long poem, and cites European writers, including Samuel Beckett who from the genre of the prose poem 'write into the open' into something much larger (Fredman 1983: 3). This is also true of Loney, a poet who often writes in extended sequences.

Delville quotes *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* to the effect that the prose poem is anything from a paragraph to three to four pages, corresponding with the average lyric poem; beyond that it loses tension and impact and becomes poetic prose, he argues (Delville 1998: 2). This is eminently debatable and one might easily argue that works such as Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* or even Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water* are extended prose poems. According to Fredman, the most drastic result of the crisis facing poetry – whether or not the writing of poetry is possible – can be seen to manifest in the long poem and the poetry of prose (Fredman 1983: 4–5).

The long poem has been noted for its ability to extend the nineteenth century innovations of free verse, the dramatic monologue and prose poem by setting free verse a large task, and to invoke 'history as its discursive horizon' (Silliman 2011, n.p.). CK Stead notes Pound's 'epic ambition' and work which attempts to contain history (Stead 1981: 149). Ron Silliman argues that the long poem is 'an ideal form for thinking through questions of the frontier', perhaps of poetry itself. He continues, 'these are, not coincidentally, also cosmological questions: where does the universe end? What stops it? What lies beyond? How do we reach past all that is the case?' (Silliman 2011). These are questions that drive the writing of poetry as experiment, including prose poetry. Such questions are easily identified in Loney's work, where the frontier of language and what it can do is paramount. This preoccupation correlates with Fredman's idea that such writers deconstruct or abandon genres, 'Language . . . becomes the medium, and language likewise becomes the object of investigation or creation' (Fredman 1983: 4).

Ideas about technique and theory are major themes in Loney's work; such self-consciousness often emanates from longer poems, and perhaps goes hand in hand with the problem of re-defining or resisting boundaries. The long work is characteristic of Loney's oeuvre. His *Dear Mondrian* (1976) is a book-length sequence of poems. *Missing parts: Poems 1977–1990* (1992) is composed of nine sequences. *The erasure tapes* (1994) comprises three long sequences, as stated. *Envoy* (1996) is a single long poem over 17 pages. Other collections feature substantial poems of eight to ten pages, such as 'wind' and 'cloud' from *Fragmenta Nova* (2005). His notebook series –

Sidetracks: Notebooks 1976–1991 (1998); *Crankhandle*: *Notebooks November 2010–June 2012* (2015), and *Melbourne journal: Notebooks: 1998–2003* (2016a) – are, effectively, extended sequences, the glancing segments of which intersect suggestively.

I have discussed the link between Loney's work and postmodernism elsewhere (Bullock 2016) and will not repeat that research here, except to briefly recapitulate a few ideas in so far as they relate to Fredman's ideas about openness, language and the long poem.

Features of postmodernism, such as a revolt against authority and signification and the relativism brought about by the proliferation of literary theories in the latter part of the twentieth century (Cuddon 1998: 689–90), are easily observable in prose poetry. A major feature of postmodernism is the use of the fragment. It has been observed that whereas modernism employs the fragment in a way that laments loss of traditional values, postmodernism wields it with delighted freedom (Barry 2009: 80–81). Santilli's discussion of the romantic fragment suggests that it has an 'emphasis on its contradictory aspects: individuality and plurality' (Santilli 2002: 36). It is tempting to correlate the lyrical fragment with the romantic fragment and to see the postmodern fragment as something which comes even later, but this would be too simplistic and linear an argument, given the problems of succession from modernism to postmodernism.[3] Other features of postmodernism, such as the collapsing of distinctions between high and low culture, self-conscious intertextuality and collage-like effects (Dix 2011: 328), will also be familiar to readers of prose poetry. Fundamentally, the problem of genre may well be rejected by postmodernism, its texts 'characterised by its appropriation of other genres, both high and popular, by its longing for a both/and situation rather than one of either/or' (Perloff, 1989: 8). In this sense, the prose poem sits squarely within the postmodern world, with its inherent hybrid status.

The idea of openness can be linked to the concept of 'Open form', which, in turn, was also associated with postmodernism. Open form was a concept popular in the seventies and eighties and very much a reflection of the influence of American poetics, especially from Charles Olson's essay 'Projective Verse' (1972 [1950]), and developed by other writers such as Umberto Eco in *The open work* (1989), and discussed in New Zealand by CK Stead (1981: 23–26), and Alistair Paterson, who reckoned Loney's work exemplified the principles of open form more than that of any other New Zealand poet (Paterson 1980: xvii).

A precursor

'The erasure tapes' seems related to an earlier, lineated work: 'Crystal fountain' (from *Missing parts: Poems 1977–1990*). Both employ an *in medias res* strategy, with each page beginning part way through a sentence and ending in the same manner. This technique is another take on the fragment.

The lines of 'Crystal fountain' are largely descriptive, yet feature a jolting enjambment and juxtaposing of fragments that wouldn't otherwise belong together – as opposed to the loosely associated fragments that often flow through the prose poem sentence. The content of the second poem in the sequence alludes to caring for someone who has

sustained a fracture, the alliterative 'fact of fracture' and the arrangement of lines and caesurae assisting the evocation of that theme. At the same time, the poem will 'Break up the meaning packets' (Loney 1992: 38) structurally, celebrating the fragment.

Page four of its eight pages begins:

> erectile water. The outside reader without
> wind to turn pages. More than I do. Less
> than I am. The subversion relies on a
> more or less stable condition of the
> language. Suicide sale. No sentence that
> cannot live beside this one. (40)

The poem achieves a subversion of the line (with at least the appearance of a sentence signalled by fullstops midway through a line), even as the prose poem subverts the poetic line break and prose narrative.

The seventh poem of the sequence begins:

> fire won't stop, nor the silver. Sexed
> it came out a. 'Audiences of the world.' All
> prior sentences could disappear behind this
> one. (43)

The reference to prior sentences raises the point that it's hard to end a quote from this text once begun. The writing uses a kind of narrative impetus via the reader's expectation of the sentence to drive the writing forward. It is unrelenting, one can't put it down – as with a text such as *The Unnamable* (Beckett 1959 [1952]) – and despite plot being largely absent. Such experiments in omission yield successful additions of material.

The extreme enjambment of the lines 'The pieces are rearranged not / having moved' stretches the semiotic reference to its opposite meaning in a way that I've observed of a more subtle example in another Loney poem (Bullock 2017: 225). The movement from lineation to prose may be an important experiment for the poet – this is Fredman's poet's prose, one could say – as it extends the possibilities of practice.

'The erasure tapes'

This eponymous prose poem is a sequence of thirteen full pages. The clipped characteristics of 'Crystal fountain' expand, not just into more frequent and sustained lyricism but into freer associations. It employs the sentence rather than the line as its guiding mode, and, in some ways, seems to fulfil some references from 'Crystal fountain'.

The lines of the lineated poem discussed already experiment with the sentence fragment. With the additional presence of the line break, it creates a fitful rhythm. In contrast, the sequence of sentences through 'The erasure tapes' is often characterised by a flowing musicality. In taking up the option of the prose poem, Loney gives more freedom to the rhythm of phrases and to the development of ideas. A connection with Beckett is again suggested by the work's title, and one might imagine the solitary main

character unlocking draws and speaking onto tape about the past in *Krapp's last tape* (Beckett 1959).

The particular associative freedom that the compression of the prose poem sets up offers possibilities which can be explored with each reading. The first page runs:

> a light moving around walls, on wallpaper recalled only in the kitchen, in small tears, a bright red berry or flower, and black stalks. To lop the top off memory's silo, here, in that room, or all the rooms one lay awake in, to get at what day and night light showed, and now does not. We sipped white sherbet thru a liquorice straw in a white paper bag, is that what we did. He fell for whatever hex, sui generis, was waved at him. Not to print, but to write, copperplate, the lower case filling the line. He's no old pro if sere. Ere it got to words it usually fled. Two sat fishing, or three, or one alone. Recollections added up to a negative. Vain hope the tack would not split twigs made catapults. Solfa became a scale, singing for an old woman, name not known, in a house not placed, the ion charging him from earth's pod to air, air's plaint to dew. In love meant more than it should. As if there is something, finally, semantic in sound. The mind is, in some way, all these things. I can sew a button, but not a shirt. What years wood-working, and what made. With, and without, rhyme and reason. Endless hours on a rockinghorse would not know the lye of an ancient cure, the nonchalance in the heart of need not then divined. How sea fades to cloud, cloud to sky. Equals? Try culling the bright cussed difference between the tree-fort and a father's ire. Edit whatever dog-eared texts held in store for him. A cent for a penny, not any more. Was just the issue, established at the window, the raindrops running down. Ore of a sort. The bed took three of us for years, two top, one tail. Snip lint. Language, he sd, is an activity. Fill in the dress. Snip lint. Who, on art's burlesque, lives the simple life, is not out to get a tan. Overstepping, o Alexander!, the limits of the world, the cost, ever, per diem. Who worked with him were engineers, iron-moulders, fitters, turners, pattern-makers, labourers. It's in the book. Wet cave walls, black, dripping over moss. In all gigs played, he was never on the dance floor. These are, and are not, the words of the ancestors. Shall I, from the edge, slip into something more comfortable. (Loney 1994: 35)

Memory, and uncertainty about it, are quickly established as important topics, and biography is implied by sentences such as 'The bed took three of us for years, two top, one tail'. But the narrative threads routinely trail off into lyrical details and a focus on language, in phrases such as 'He fell for whatever hex, sui generis, was waved at him' and 'He's no old pro if sere' with the connotation of 'if sere' being beautifully ambiguous. Sentences like 'Vain hope the tack would not split twigs made catapults' juxtapose and merge clauses in unexpected ways. Yet the fragmentary, individual phrases, such as 'air's plaint to dew', satisfy the reader's expectation of the lyrical. The ideas are pressed together, sentence by sentence. They are less organised than they might be – there is no line here to control reading (Hartman 1980: 13). The comment on various activities, 'With, and without, rhyme and reason', might be read as an analogy with the concerns of line and sentence (with rhyme representing line and reason representing the sentence, which accords with the idea of the language of criticism being borrowed by the prose poem).

Some sentence fragments clearly act as a bridge between connotations, for example, the question 'Equals?' (This is one of the few direct questions in the text, which otherwise poses most questions without the use of a question mark, so that they might also be read as statements.) The mind moves from the idea of whether sea and sky may be equated to a quite different issue of equality between father and son, a persistent concern in this trove of memories. The lyrical phrase or sentence acts as a bridge between thoughts which are memories and those which show a more general concern. For example, the elegance of 'Try culling the bright cussed difference between the tree-fort and a father's ire', introduces the troubled relationship with a father; and the injunction 'Try culling' suggests that certain recollections cannot be erased.

The father figure is regularly associated with the book throughout the text (Loney gained his interest in typesetting from his father: 'The father lit a time' (36)). This close relationship, together with the ambiguous use of the third person 'he' in the poem as a whole, make statements such as 'These are, and are not, the words of the ancestors' plausible and give it further possible reference points. It introduces a heightened awareness common to Loney's poetry of the two sides of a truth or possibility. While these might be internal associations on the part of the poet, they are by no means hidden from the reader. The tailing off of 'Shall I, from the edge, slip into something more comfortable' is self-consciously indicative of the 'edges' of the poem sequence. An analogy with form and the intersection between poetry and prose is suggested as we leave the sentence fragment. At the same time, the voice of the text wonders about slipping into something more comfortable, as if anticipating that this writing on the edge might stretch the reader's concentration.

The assertion that language is an activity is crucial. It points to *parole* – the spoken words of the individual user – rather than *langue* – the collective understanding. In other cases, where Loney alludes to the limitations of language, a sense of frustration at being caught unavoidably in the wholeness that is *langue* pervades the writing. The problems of the incompleteness and subjectivity of memory mirrors issues of language. The concern with language pertains to reading as well: 'Is there escape from reading as shoveling the conventions into the mouth'. The phrasing of sentences range from the incomplete and fragmentary to the expansive: 'Sat in little chairs, with a grown-up pointing the words with a long stick, and all singing jesus wants me for a sunbeam' (36).

The following passage begins by using pragmatic language in a way that again recalls descriptions of prose poetry as able to incorporate the language and tone of the essay:

> They sd one day a relation stopped a relation using a shotgun on a relation to protect a relation. How grand to dislike an era, slope off, write no ode, and break at syntax's overheads. He'd rave in his illness, offer the life-savings to who'd put him down. The name changed, 1953, a new noise came to ear. How to make a sentence with 'earlier' in it, and not refer to a prior sentence. Where did it come from, the trick of failing in the core of success. Forgetting comes as a memory function. Crash, ride, sizzle and high-hat were the names of the cymbals. (36)

The strained pragmatism concerning the relations is immediately followed by an unpacking of the sentence, as well as a reference to writing no ode (in prose poetry).

The phrase 'syntax's overheads' is semantically unexpected, yet euphonious. The poem employs radical contractions which speed up delivery and help compress the syntax in fascinating ways. This is a particularly refreshing approach, as many poets write as if we don't use contractions in speech at all, let alone in ways which harness the potential of experiments with syntax. Contractions are the norm in speech, and not the exception.

The idea of forgetting as a memory function melds philosophy with poetry, and enhances the subtly nuanced trope of comparison of opposites in the poem. Yet, it stays close to the poetic mode, whereas later works, such as *Beginnings* (Loney 2016b), move further towards the lyric essay. The writing brings one's suspicions about memory to bear. We have to have faith that there is a connection between sentences, and we eventually find them. The transitions are elastic and the grammar has to be, too. These exercises in omission trick the ideas that are present. The text manipulates language and sense in the reference to 'earlier'. Then the names of things are recalled with a kind of pedantic, prosaic simplicity 'were the names of the cymbals'. I found myself wanting to write in a similar way to the text while typing this paper, a mimetic response which suggests the convincing properties of the writing.

In contrast to the idea that some memories can't be erased comes this idea about using memories purposefully:

> I aimed to reject you by forgetting. By this memory I will bury you. No thing's on a par with any other thing. A joust is a thing, seen only in the movies, but oh I felt the weapon strike me here, here and here. The best present was, and is, a book. If I had told the story of my life I would probably be killed at once by several people. Raspberries in a field, cows in a paddock, rocks in a creek, trout in a stream. All words like this are demonstrably covert. (38)

It adds to the set of reflections on the difficulty of comparing things through the claim that 'No thing's on a par with any other thing'. The reference to a joust seems random but is reconnected to the idea of bodily pain associated with memory by the gesturing of 'here, here and here'. Memories come like sparks on the carpet, in the midst of philosophical ruminations (43). Even the seemingly random cannot escape meaning, surrounded by potential associations and accommodated by the reader's inclination to form a narrative.

The compressed quality of many sentences, with multiple phrases, has the effect of speeding up associations; they mimic the free association of the mind by not separating phrases into lines, lines which might suggest – at least in the absence of enjambment – discrete ideas. The sentence fragment achieves similar, related effects to enjambment. Though the full stop ostensibly makes for a break or pause, the rhythm of the sequence can just as easily work against it. The full stop has an effect we might liken to the end of a line, but it is still in many ways less final, since the reading eye has permission to continue moving forward in the sequence.

The book is a comfort. Yet words are covert (ideas appearing later in the sequence shed light on this claim). It is implied by the covertness of words that even the natural world is unreliable, re-emphasised later in the text by the sentence: 'Watched birds all his life, and's still augur of the nothing that's the real' (38). Like the poem, printing changes our relation to time: 'Printed letter, printed word, printed line, printed page, printed

book would and do slow him down' (38). Once more the preoccupation with letterpress, reading and the book are displayed, and the informative, essay-like sentence assists in embodying the concept within the text. The power of language is partly the power of print, which can 'reshape him when I'm gone' (41).

Question statements such as 'Is the figurative literal enough' (39) also suggest the preoccupation with the problems of language. Existential doubt is focussed in language, as it has to be, and as this sentence shows: 'Are there very last things, are there' (39). Each moment is a catchword, the text states – language is pervasive even in lived experience, at least when we attempt to articulate it. The 'this' of the text is 'a small typographic flare between what's gone, what's next' (40). The text asserts, perhaps in another gesture to lived experience, that not everything can be 'brought to book', suggesting now that there is something beyond the book – though we still face the problem of articulating it.

Memory is not deep-rooted, here in the present; it exists on the surface. Presence lies merely in ordinary objects (40). The potential intermingling of print, text and life reaches a kind of zenith with this imaginative, embodied image: 'Bathe in what font will type you out of the text' (41). The sentence 'The dance, the repeated steps of printing, without jerked shifts of movement or of thought, is more important than the attempt to get it right' (43) reveals the meditative 'in the moment' quality of typesetting, and reflects, obviously, on process. Life is depicted as a riddle of text: 'To what text, now, that self's a tale not to be told, in a world not to be written' (43). It's not just the story of a life that can't be told, but that no explanation of the self can be given (except perhaps, referring to the reference immediately above, in the act of doing, without thought).

Ambiguous aspects of language are again raised by the issues of comparison, reinforced by the intertextual reference to Shakespeare's Sonnet #18: 'Shall I compare thee to anything when all of us are beyond compare' (40). This quandary is further emphasised by the statements: 'What do you do when you say one thing's like another. It's about time' – the double meaning of the second sentence sets up an example of ambiguity which resembles life itself (41). In Loney's poem, 'there's a lee side to every word' (42), a fine metaphor for the swirling movement of language and its unpredictability, its lack of fixety. The text states: 'I will contend only that everything & nothing is the case; furthermore, 'All's alloy', implying a lack of purity, that all things are a composite, so why compare them anyway, since they are bound up so tightly in each other (43).

The way narrative threads habitually break off as the fascination for language interferes with the progression of the story has been characterised as a feature of prose poetry (Fredman 1983, 1). In 'The erasure tapes' this includes playful engagements with language features, such as alliteration in 'The percussive ingenuity of paradiddles' (38) and 'Pure poetry's putrid parsimony' (39). It focusses on grammar: 'hints weren't hented' (36); recycles clichés: 'speak & be spoken thru' (41), and puzzles over language and meaning in statements like: 'Here is nowhere near where there is' (40).

Lyric and narrative have been described as 'two poles that create a process'; the ambiguity of the prose poem is useful for both elements (Gross 2014).[4] References to

criticism and the language of the essay finds self-conscious expression in Loney's long and complex series of ideas: 'What talks this essay, dropped into "the ocean of words", like, today, the season's first fog, lying low over the park, condensation dripping down the windows' (41). The quote marks around the metaphor 'the ocean of words' seem to mock the idea, perhaps the self as writer, or the impetus to write. References to a reviewer and a review (45, 46) continue the discursive mode, and the following question statement suggests an ongoing dissatisfaction with the idea of certainty: 'Is there anything more irrational than a fact' (42).

The text is honest about the uncertainties of memory. It is self-consciously aware of its own repetitions: 'Did I say it before: there's no par for any of it. Tho I suspect the wordless, the sayable's not its boundary' (47). This passage also accords with earlier ideas that something beyond thought is where existence lies. The statement 'Nothing will remain unpublished' (42) pertains to the techniques used in the poem as much as content, in the sense that its hybrid form allows more to be written and published. Inevitably, the text contradicts this passage by asserting 'Much known won't be written, by choice' (43). The use of language in memory is so reliant on perception that 'You represent nothing to yourself' (43). We might interpret the text's ambiguity as a resistance to closure, and of a type which is common to prose poetry (Perloff 1999: 47).

Here, an individual's relationships with memory, language and perception reflect the postmodern world. The work is distinctive as a piece of prose poetry, its style bearing little discernible relation to influential works in English that Loney might have encountered by this time, such as Seamus Heaney's *Stations* (1975), which focusses on terse narratives; or Charles Simic's *The world doesn't end: Prose poems* (1989), which, despite a surreal playfulness that is distinct from Baudelaire's suggestive and incomplete short narratives, is still primarily concerned with narrative threads. Mark Strand's *The Monument* (1978), with its emphasis on undecidability, comes closest to Loney's mode but is not nearly so closely focussed on the construction of an internal monologue as is Loney's.

By 1994, Loney had often published essays on poetry and the book arts. He later wrote a prose memoir *The falling* (2000), but it was not until 2005 that he again wrote prose poetry.

'Gifts'

This sequence of four prose poems has a more sustained narrative thread than does 'The erasure tapes', with more complete sentences; it is not so unfinished, yet is still concerned with 'the what of saying' (Loney 2005: 37). In the second poem, 'Poeisis', the question statement ponders:

> Did you make it up, as if inventing the written text is itself a kind of reconciliation. But reading my own prior texts is also to find that they were ahead of me – written here for hearing tomorrow, read here for hearing tomorrow. What comes, comes ever from the heart, there is nowhere else, deny it all your heart desires. (38)

Nothing can be made up, that's already been established in earlier works – we are too dependent on existing language and memories, whether present in the present or

distorted by our perceptions. The idea that writing can enact a kind of prophecy of the self is a fascinating and resonant one, which I can certainly relate to in my own poetic practice. It is a strange revelation when one finds that one's own writing forms a kind of premonition of needs, the full realisation of which does not arrive for some time. In a way that hasn't occurred overtly in any other Loney text before now, the heart is affirmed as a guiding force. Other kinds of aphorism close 'Poiesis':

> 'Poetry' is too small a word for the cry that issues from the mouth. 'Form' is too small a word for the shapeliness of words upon the page, the clothes upon the body, the painting upon the dear face of the beloved, the shapes we make by walking upon the earth which is ourselves. (38)

They acknowledge the broadly poetic, rather than the mere poem, and handle form in a similarly magnanimous and empathic way.

In 'The black art', the book is uncertain food: 'held like a bowl we feed from, glutting ourselves on the blood of the book'. Though we easily detect echoes of the preoccupation with the book form 'The erasure tapes' the printing process has become tainted, and the apparatus of the press is now 'ghastly'. The dance that earlier seemed so productive seeks release from the associated 'pathetic search for certainty' (39). This 'dark view' is yet again a manifestation of frustration with the limitations of language.

The fourth poem in the sequence shares its title with the much earlier lineated poem from *Missing parts*, discussed above. Here is the first half of it:

> **Crystal fountain** sparrows, but for the broken embryo on the footpath, are eternal. At a certain point, clothes express not personality but one's condition. Some paintings are better served by reproduction. The morning frost, white spikes of grass. To relate the good, he had to relate all else as well. Living alone is a function of community, is it not? To retrieve his anger he decides that it is his, but is not him. He is always moved at the sight of the morning star and the evening star, the one in the two. What do you know, he asks, of the nightshade family. Of all the noises, singing is one of the least disagreeable, that's all it is. Out of the documents, let the documents begin! This morning he woke up with the words 'longing as retribution'. Something akin to and strong in grief like the best music. I am indebted for all these uplifted words. The trees available to be barked up are legion. Today's lesson asks if the working of the mind remains, in spite of all written history and effect, pre-literate. In the beginning was the Word, the sound of which has yet to catch up with him. All description is basically unfair. (40)

Again, a new perspective on the idea of reproduction is presented, where, in previous poems, the postmodernist concern with the falsity of postmodern reproduction was in evidence.[5] Evocative and fragmentary details which come to us through incomplete sentences are again presented in contrast with larger ideas, such as the reference to the morning frost which follows this philosophical notion. Relating the good and the bad and the conflating of living alone and community both recall the reference to forgetting as a facet of memory in 'The erasure tapes', and its concern with opposites and comparisons. There is a separation of behaviour and essence in the reference to anger. The transitions between ideas are implied rather than spelt out – for example, we might guess that the question about nightshade follows a companionable few minutes gazing

at the stars. The importance of the book, in the present of the poem, has now become the importance of the document, which seems altogether more prosaic and perhaps an indication of an even more bureaucratic era. References to the mind recall other poems, including 'The erasure tapes', where the leaps and departures of thinking are foregrounded. The closing statement shows continued reflection on the limitations of language: whilst the word is still crucial, our articulations are flawed.

Conclusion

The inclination to experiment and to cross genres or abandon them is symptomatic of a certain type of poet. Often, poets who have made distinct experiments with page space, such as William Carlos Williams, Olson and Lyn Hejinian, have then gone on to explore the absence of lineation and the possibilities which prose offers, and which the typesetter/poet might spy. One wonders what stops poets writing prose or works which experiment with page space. The answer may well be a fear of the unfamiliar or unknown that occupying the rest of the page, including the right hand margin, represents (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 186–92). The collection *The erasure tapes* shows no such fear, and its eponymous prose poem epitomises the fact.

'The erasure tapes' can be seen as bridging the concerns of the long poem and the poetry of prose via the prose poem, whilst also (fittingly) questioning its own parameters. The mocking self-examination of sentences like, 'Am I following sound principles of autobiographical practice' (44), is typical of its self-consciousness. The frontiers of form and content are explored with openness to language, within its deferred narrative threads.

Whilst 'The erasure tapes' may seem to explore the possibilities of the prose poem in a more systematic and even frenzied manner, many of the same techniques and preoccupations recur in 'Gifts'. There is perhaps a stronger focus on a descriptive component of narrative in the latter, but the fragment is still frequently employed.

The long poem seems to be the necessary vehicle for Loney's celebration of the fragment and in order to showcase the openness of his writing. It allows the reader to co-create and become immersed in the work, analogous to the text's own body bathing in type. It evokes a consciousness and an example of lived experience through a hybrid medium which is indeed 'central to our time' (Fredman, see above). In each of Loney's works discussed here, the text explores language and meaning through the long poem or sequence. For poetic practice, Loney's work suggests that openness to technique, whether that be the classic tools of lineation or the prosaic and elusive substrata of prose, is as important as the writing of openness into form through the use of ambiguity and deferred meaning, and wrestling with what it remains possible to say.

The erasure in question in Loney's masterwork could be that of memory, meaning, or connection. Meaning and connectivity are handled differently in the long poem than in, say, a short lyric, and build sense and connection in different ways, through juxtaposition, accumulation of references and the questioning of perspective in the individual's response to language and its unavoidable wedding with memory. In other words, if we were to look for an opposite of the word 'erasure', we might choose

'addition', or, in the poet's own language, 'gift'. The prose poem's gift offers a diversity of tools and structures, via the sentence and sentence fragment, supremely useful for the practitioner of poetry who wishes to experiment and extend their range.

Endnotes

1. Riffaterre also makes the point about the term being an oxymoron (Riffaterre 1983: 117).
2. I'm thinking of situations like Mark Strand's *The Monument* (1978) being nominated for a major award and then withdrawn, due to poets' negative reactions to a work of prose poetry being considered alongside lineated work.
3. Disputed, for example, by Perloff (1999: 28).
4. Or, as Delville puts it, such metagenres 'are always already contaminated by the traces of other generic categories they tend to subscribe to or exclude' (Delville 1998: 9).
5. See Loney 1994: 46.

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