

## Who are the Contemporary Symbolists? The Prose Poem and the Decorative-Subjective Approach

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## **Who are the Contemporary Symbolists? The Prose Poem and the Decorative-Subjective Approach**

*Ruth Stacey*

In 1891 the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, interviewed by Jules Huret was quoted as saying, “To name an object is to remove three-quarters of the enjoyment of a poem, which derives from the pleasure of gradually perceiving it; to suggest it, that is the dream. It is the perfect use of that mystery which is the symbol: to evoke an object little by little [...]”<sup>1</sup> This chapter will discuss contemporary examples of the prose poem in reference to its origin as a Symbolist poetic form that allows a space for specific poetic techniques, such as musicality, decorativeness and subjectivity. It will examine the work of contemporary practitioners who are utilising this particularly symbolist approach in their work, with a focus on the poets Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington. It will discuss the prose poem as a symbolist poetic space that prioritises a decorative-descriptive experience for the reader, and contrast its immediate density on the page, often typeset as a square, with the expansive potential the unlineated sentences of prose allow for playfulness and experimentation. Furthermore, the original symbolist poets also sought to combine emotional expression and a surfeit of feelings and sensory experience within their writing, and this chapter discusses how intertextuality and memoir are used by poets I identify as contemporary symbolists in order to achieve similar ends. This chapter examines the ways in which deliberate ambiguity in the use of symbolic imagery, and unsettling subjectivity in the narrative “I,” result in a layering of voices and movements through time periods which creates the suggestion of meaning but no certainty. Based on this critical understanding, the chapter will conclude by reflecting upon this symbolist approach in my own practise.

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<sup>1</sup> Jules Huret, *Interview with Stéphane Mallarmé*. <https://www.aaronrobertson.co/translations/mallarme-interview/> [Accessed 16 September 2021].

## A Provocation

Posing the question *Who are the contemporary symbolists?* is a provocative beginning to this chapter, adopting a confrontational approach which sits well with the original symbolist poets who were famed for their rebellion against the traditional poetics of their age. I believe the challenging aspect of this question is the application of a categorical label to twenty-first-century poets, which may appear to be limiting them within the confines of a particular *-ism*, rather than being free to define themselves. No poet likes to be contained. However, my intention is not to limit, but to view the poets discussed through a particular lens in order to illuminate a commonality they share, and identify certain techniques that may be utilised in creative practise by other poets to write contemporary symbolist poetry for themselves. The question is also provocative because symbolist poetics were not abandoned and forgotten in the nineteenth century, but rather became the foundation of the literary movements that followed, thereby being both influential and enriching for the poets of the twentieth century, with aspects integral to contemporary poetics. Its legacy may be observed in, for example, neo-surrealism, the use of *vers libre*, and the prose poem form. Therefore, suggesting that certain poets are doing something *more* than this and are more specifically “symbolist” requires focus on other aspects of symbolist poetics; most significantly, musicality, subjectivity and decorativeness. Thirdly, it is a provocation, because the first symbolist poets, after flaring into popularity in the *fin de siècle* era for their rich use of language and idealism (which contrasted with the practical, brutalist, industrialised society surrounding the poet practitioners) latterly became viewed as using a kind of sickening opulence of language, with the symbolists becoming interchangeable with the decadents, and the term “decadent” altering signification from pleasing to insulting. In short, symbolists were viewed as “too much” and their style of poetry an affectation.

To take one example, Lisa Goldfrab notes that, “For Auden it is hard to imagine a worse outcome for a poet than to endorse a symbolist aesthetic and ‘to retreat from rhyme and reason into a Mallarmesque / syllabic fog,’”<sup>2</sup> and this conjured image of symbolist poetics as a fog (something damp and annoying, or worse, something negative and frightening to be lost within) articulates why twenty-first-century poets may not wish to be assigned thus. Yet, it is precisely this opulent-sensual approach, combined with playfulness, musicality, and subjectivity to create an all-encompassing fog of symbolist poetics, that certain poets are employing in their approach to prose poetry; not merely in their use of the form, but by fully embracing symbolist practice in all its “Mallarmesque” profusion.

### **Defining Symbolism**

In order to define the poets who are working as contemporary symbolists I must first explain my purpose is not to provide an in-depth history of the symbolist movement here but move swiftly to define the language through which I will discuss contemporary practitioners. Symbolist poetics is often associated with, and has greatly influenced, other movements such as decadence and aestheticism, imagism, and surrealism, and could be considered the bedrock of modernism. Baudelaire initiated the symbolist aesthetic movement when he published *Les fleurs du mal* in 1857, and it would become a huge influence on the French poets who followed him and rebelled against realism and descriptive preciseness. These poets included Paul Verlaine, who published a collection of essays in 1884 defining symbolism and discussing poets (himself included), who he named as “cursed poets” – *poètes maudits* – those who were at odds with society, including Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé and others. Verlaine did

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Goldfrab, *Unexpected Affinities: Modern American Poetry and Symbolist Poetics* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2018), 48.

not see the poets' curse of suffering as tragic, but as vital to produce art, and this myth (that a poet must suffer), perpetuated by Rimbaud's fierce poetry of revolt and subsequent rejection of the life of a poet at a young age, lingers in the perception of symbolist poets. However, although there was an aspect of rebellion and rejection of society norms within the movement, it was also about striving for something, through imagination and dreams, greater than ordinary perceptions. As Rosina Neginsky observes of Schopenhauer, "pessimism [...] played an important role in the evolution of the symbolist worldview,"<sup>3</sup> and she quotes Schopenhauer's view that, "Fine art can give us temporary relief from ceaseless striving by making us forget our desiring individuality in the aesthetic act of rapt contemplation,"<sup>4</sup> positioning the production of art as providing a refuge from the everyday. It is this aspect of symbolist poetics on which I shall focus.

Despite the *Manifesto of Symbolism* by Jean Moréas, published in *Le Figaro* in September 1886, the symbolist movement, in sympathy with the manifesto's aims perhaps, is difficult to pin down, as may be indicated by its range and influence mentioned above. The manifesto itself, although aiming to consolidate the movement, is itself poetic and subjective and open to interpretation. In it Moréas writes that, "Symbolic poetry seeks to clothe the Idea in a sensual form [...] because the essential character of Symbolic art consists of continuing until the concentration of the Idea in itself."<sup>5</sup> Building upon this, Nathalia Brodskaya defines how, "Symbolism opposed society's ideas of science, aspiring to return art to the priority of the spiritual over the material,"<sup>6</sup> and thus represented a desire for the ineffable rather than the certain, and goes on to describe the symbolists' pursuit of the "dream" space as, "a

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<sup>3</sup> Rosina Neginsky, "Introduction," in *Symbolism, Its Origins and Its Consequences*, ed. Rosina Neginsky (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Schopenhauer, cited in Neginsky, *Symbolism*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Moréas, "Manifesto of Symbolism," in *Symbolism*, ed. Nathalia Brodskaya (New York: Parkstone Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Brodskaya, *Symbolism*, 30.

demonstration and even a symbol of their exceptional imagination, capable of transcending reality.”<sup>7</sup>

My interpretation of this focuses on the ideas of clothing and continuing, dream and transcendence. The image Moréas conjures of “clothing” an “Idea,” could suggest clothing to mean covering (to make enigmatic) or clothing as saturating by layering words like fabric sheets, wrapping words on words (to make rich and dense). Combined with the concept of continuing (to denote expansiveness), this definition of symbolist poetics can be seen, as many scholars agree, to be exemplified or perfected in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé. As a poet myself, who sees words in a very visual way with an image forming in my mind, I picture Moréas’ description of “clothing” and “continuing” as a statue wrapped in layers of fabrics, becoming more remote and enigmatic with each layer. This idea could be described as a technique of veiling, with the veil both obscuring and tantalising the reader. I call this approach to writing poetry not simply a symbolist approach, but a kind of decorative ambiguity, with the intention of layering, saturating, and overwhelming the poem with imagery and symbols to actually reveal, as Moréas defined it, “the primordial idea.”<sup>8</sup> To write poetry with a decorative-subjective approach, one can return to Mallarmé and his definition of certain working principles that define the idea of the dream state in the poem as central to the transcendence of reality. In the same 1891 interview with Jules Huret with which I opened the chapter, Mallarmé is quoted as saying,

The contemplation of objects, the images that soar up from the reveries induced by them, are the song; the Parnassians grasp the object in its entirety and show

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<sup>7</sup> Brodskaya, *Symbolism*, 34.

<sup>8</sup> Moréas, *Manifesto*, 10.

it. In doing so they lack mystery; they remove from minds the delectable pleasure of believing that they are the ones creating.<sup>9</sup>

What is striking in Mallarmé's description of his poetic practice is how unapologetic he is in his use of sensual description and recognition of the bodily experience of making and reading poetry. It produces reveries, it is delectable and creates pleasure. Writing of Mallarmé in 1899, Arthur Symons asserted that he lived a life of "persistent devotion to literature," and that all his poems

are the evocation of a passing ecstasy, arrested in mid-flight [...] It is a mental transposition of emotion and sensation, veiled with atmosphere, and becoming, as it becomes a poem, pure beauty,<sup>10</sup>

describing both the process of making and of reading Mallarmé's poetry in language that could be describing a romantic experience. However, Mallarmé is not invoking longing for a lover or retelling romantic encounters within the poems to create sensual scenarios. As Henri Peyre observes, "the elegies and the invocations to women, the tenderness of relived memory [...] cease with Mallarmé to be one of the central motifs of poetry,"<sup>11</sup> emphasising that it was pursuit of suggestion and idealism, above everyday superficialities, that directed Mallarmé's poetic practice.

Mallarmé's poems were crafted to leave things unsaid in order to allow the "delectable pleasure" of inviting the reader to "believe they are the ones creating." Peyre quotes a "youthful

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<sup>9</sup> Huret, *Interview*.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (United Kingdom: Lightening Source, 1899), 72.

<sup>11</sup> Henri Peyre, *What is Symbolism?* trans. by Emmett Parker (Tuscaloosa, AB: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 67.

article” written by the twenty-year-old Mallarmé in *L'Artiste* (15 September, 1862), that states in its first line, “Everything sacred that wants to remain sacred envelops itself in mystery,”<sup>12</sup> and this links neatly to the image of the veiled statue described previously as a way to begin thinking about creating decorative ambiguity within one’s own poetic practice today. Taking a somewhat mysterious and ineffable concept and turning it into a practical first step, by creating a visual expression of it, has been helpful in my own practice. Discussing Mallarmé’s practice, Symons wrote that,

By the time the poem has reached, as it seems to him, a flawless unity, the steps of the progress have been only too effectively effaced; and while the poet, who has seen the thing from the beginning, still sees the relation of point to point, the reader who comes to it only its final stage, finds himself in a not unnatural bewilderment.<sup>13</sup>

This focus on removing any certainties through the process of crafting the poem, on suggesting, hinting, and “clothing” the original idea or inspiration within the poem, is expressed by Mallarmé in the Huret interview as “enigma.” In this interview, Mallarmé states that, “In poetry there must always be enigma, and the goal of literature, there is in fact no other, is to *evoke* objects,”<sup>14</sup> showing once more his absolute devotion to his aim; this goal or *no other*. As Symons observed, “Pursue this manner of writing to its ultimate development; start with an enigma, and then withdraw the key of the enigma; and you arrive easily, at the frozen impenetrability of [Mallarmé’s] latest sonnets,”<sup>15</sup> and a frozen poem may suggest something glacial, off-putting and ultimately unreadable. However, it could also be intriguing, and not

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<sup>12</sup> Peyre, *What is Symbolism?*, 69.

<sup>13</sup> Symonds, *The Symbolist Movement*, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Huret, *Interview*.

<sup>15</sup> Symonds, *The Symbolist Movement*, 72.



having the key to unlock the enigma will in Mallarmé's view create the intended "reveries." For Mallarmé, this idea of suggestion as the aim of the poem, to be deliberately enigmatic, will elicit the "delectable pleasure" response in the reader. I suggest this could be described as flirting or teasing the reader, a pleasurable experience, and one which I shall shortly explore this in the contemporary prose poems of Cassandra Atherton.

By returning to the source of symbolist poetics and its most devoted practitioner, and by distilling certain elements from Mallarmé's practice – namely the evocation of enigma above all things, and the creation of images that stimulate reverie – we can as working poets ourselves implement this pursuit of veiling in our own practice and identify it in others. I shall now turn to consider the work of poets who I believe may be considered contemporary symbolists; those who are not only working in the prose poem form, but saturating their ideas and clothing them in sensual imagery, thereby effacing the original form so the reader can no longer follow, as Symons expressed it, the poet's process "point to point,"<sup>16</sup> presenting instead a seemingly disparate connection of images. How to create reveries is something I will explore in the latter part of this chapter when I consider practice.

There are many contemporary practitioners of the prose poem form and many utilise methods such as fragmentation, collage or surreal insertions, to unbalance the reader and layer meaning. Others are, I suggest, using a more specifically symbolist approach to create enigmatic, expansive spaces within a confined space (the text block of the prose poem) to make, as David Lehman has described it in relation to another original symbolist, Rimbaud's practice: "dream landscapes and journeys, visionary fragments."<sup>17</sup> Consequently, this chapter could expand

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<sup>16</sup> Symonds, *The Symbolist Movement*, 72.

<sup>17</sup> David Lehman, "Introduction," in *Great American Prose Poems*, ed. David Lehman (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2003), 16.

indefinitely in order to examine those who are doing so, to a greater or lesser extent. For example, I would name Gasper Orozco's *Book of the Peony* (2017), discussed at length by Helen Tookey in the present volume, as a contemporary symbolist collection that is suffused with a decorative-subjective approach, employing sensual clothing of an idea in order to create an enigma; something that is layered and saturated through repeated meditations on the peony. However, I shall focus on two poets who collaborate a great deal and have also written extensively about the prose poem form in numerous articles and a recent book, *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (2020): Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington. Both create the decorative ambiguity I am seeking, and I am honing in on particular examples here, namely Atherton's sensual use of breath and intertextuality, and Hetherington's use of ekphrasis to create a decorative, picturely quality to his poetry.

Hetherington and Atherton examine the contemporary expressions of symbolist poetics in relation to Neo-Surrealism in prose poetry, noting that, "Symbolism values dream imagery and often addresses aspects of external reality through giving emphasis to more or less abstract symbols over 'realistic' description."<sup>18</sup> They go on to discuss the ways in which symbolism influenced surrealism and how "The neo-surreal is a postmodern outgrowth of such preoccupations,"<sup>19</sup> with unconscious material. They note that contemporary neo-surrealist prose poems, "tend to emphasize disruptive effects and narrative disjunction without turning inward to locate and articulate unconscious experiences and impulses."<sup>20</sup> Contemporary, mostly American prose poets, differ from their European forebears, the Symbolists and Surrealists, by their adoption of, "different manners and methods,"<sup>21</sup> but their similar purpose

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton, *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2020), 104.

<sup>19</sup> Hetherington and Atherton, *Prose Poetry*, 105.

<sup>20</sup> Hetherington and Atherton, *Prose Poetry*, 105.

<sup>21</sup> Hetherington and Atherton, *Prose Poetry*, 127.

is clear as they explore, “the stuff of dreams and nightmares.”<sup>22</sup> The original methods as articulated by Mallarmé and defined at the beginning of this chapter are a source of continued influence on contemporary poetry, as evidenced by the widespread use of neo-surreal approaches and the usefulness of the prose poem form to house these methods. I am turning the lens on Atherton and Hetherington as I appreciate their use of original symbolist poetic technique, making them my contemporary symbolists.

### **Playful Dalliance in the Poetry of Cassandra Atherton**

As I was searching for poets who were contemporary symbolists, I began by identifying the form of the prose poem as a signifier. This led to researching both the history of the prose poem and attendance at symposia at which contemporary practitioners were discussing the form. As well as the prose poem form itself, I was seeking something more, namely further use of symbolist poetics; the dreamy, decorative ambiguity that I was aiming to write in my own work to express the life of the symbolist artist Pamela Colman Smith (1878-1951). Smith, a prolific artist and illustrator who worked with Bram Stoker, William Butler Yeats and Ellen Terry, is largely forgotten despite producing one of the most famous sequences of artworks in the world, the Rider-Waite tarot deck. My poetry collection aims to create an imagined set of memoirs by Smith using symbolist techniques, which requires embedding the decorative-subjective approach throughout. In the work of Cassandra Atherton,<sup>23</sup> I found a pure example of the style I was seeking: a playful dalliance of language and structure that produced the “delectable pleasure” response as the poet held the reader in a flirtation of suggestion. This is achieved in the use of musicality through rhyme and word associations, building layers of imagery without revealing the “point to point” process, but rather effacing to leave enigmatic connections. Her

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<sup>22</sup> Hetherington and Atherton, *Prose Poetry*, 127.

<sup>23</sup> Cassandra Atherton, *Trace*, (Braidwood, NSW: Finlay Lloyd, 2015). Cassandra Atherton, *Exhumed*. (Wollongong, NSW: Grand Parade Poets, 2015).

work is inherently playful and literary, gesturing towards and citing diverse artworks – books, films, paintings – whilst gleefully erotic in places, as she uses direct address to create intimacy, constantly suggesting and hinting at other works. These references in the poems to other texts are a vital aspect of a decorative-subjective approach which creates a sensual breathlessness; a reverie of perplexing action as the reader actively participates in the poem. If only you, the reader, can connect the references, you might unlock the key to the greater picture.

Elsewhere, Hetherington and Atherton have discussed the nature of intertexts:

The choice and use of intertexts allows for insight into the writer's internal libraries, webs, interests and imaginations. When an intertext is used, it is placed in a new context and thus, reframed and reworked, it grows in meaning [...] prose poetry is markedly extended by its intertexts.<sup>24</sup>

This idea that the intertext “grows in meaning” echoes Moréas in *The Symbolist Manifesto* when he called for the poetry to continue. The prose poem form, in contrast with a constrained form, allows expansiveness with the use of unlineated poetic sentence and no capped length; but combined with intertexts, the potential for expansion and for the poem to continue outside the space on the page is immeasurably increased. Further, Hetherington and Atherton have discussed how intertexts are “subversive and playful” and expand meaning from various sources:

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton, "'Unconscionable Mystification': Rooms, Spaces and the Prose Poem," *New Writing* 12 (2015), 9.

Intertextuality is thus a powerful tool for writers of very short forms such as prose poems because of its capacity to carry across meaning from a wide variety of extended sources.<sup>25</sup>

This ability to expand outwards into texts and references beyond the poem is demonstrated in both Hetherington's and Atherton's poetry. In "Modi," from her collection *Exhumed* (2015),<sup>26</sup> Atherton focuses her attention on the painter Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920). The poem opens with a first-person voice employing sensual imagery: "I melt into his canvas. Fibres prickling my back as I search for a theme." The use of the word "melting" displays the layered meaning that is distinctive of Atherton's work, suggesting both an image of paint melting onto a canvas as a painter works, and imagery of a body's response to sexual desire. This is amplified by using the word "prickling," which conveys the tactile sensation of the paint being applied or a body being stroked, but which also carries an echo of the slang word for the penis. As the poem unfolds, Atherton layers references to Amedeo Modigliani's life and circle, including his lover Jeanne, and expands outwards through references to other painters and poets. Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is quoted, and by describing imagery that could be associated with late Pre-Raphaelite John William Waterhouse's paintings *Miranda* (1916: Private Collection) from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *A Mermaid* (1900: Royal Academy), Atherton moves outwards in playful, sensual associations to create a rush of wetness at the end of the poem, signifying climax perhaps after the foreplay at the beginning of the poem. This exuberance, and the bold references to desire and sex – "Poking me with the wooden end of the brush, I climb onto its wooden tip" – invite the reader to take part in this reverie of associations and expansive dialogue about artist and muse. With transformative slippage in the space of the

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton, "An Intertextual Poiesis: the Luminous Image and a 'Round Loaf of Indian and Rye,'" *New Writing*, 17:3 2019, 259-271.

<sup>26</sup> Atherton, *Exhumed*, 33.

prose poem, the reader can become the narrative “I” and, in searching for meaning, the key, becoming active in the poem. This puzzling out of enigmatic intertextuality is, I suggest, the way in which reveries are created. What Mallarmé described as the “delectable pleasure,” a trance of suggestion, is the reader actively participating in the poem. Atherton is bolder than Mallarmé, who created ethereal and lofty reveries; she is a contemporary symbolist, in her dalliance with the reader, referencing much more direct sensuality.

In one sense, I have discussed this poem in particular as I did understand the key – the references to the artist and his life, the wider allusions – and understanding the intertexts allows one a feeling of figuring out the puzzle. Sometimes Atherton is direct in her referencing, using a quotation, a title, or even an epigraph. But the poems are never straightforward and leap like little fish, slippery and hard to hold as different images accumulate and continue to linger, requiring re-reading. However, I find there is as much, if not more, delectable pleasure in the poems in which I do not immediately understand the intertexts or connections. The images instead layer to create a sensual evocation of some deeper feeling and the desire to understand creates the reverie intended, as I actively puzzle out a line or an image and wonder what it reminds me of. This in turn, draws my experiences into the space of Atherton’s poem.

Atherton likes to move from one image to another, describing it vividly and then moving rapidly on as another image is suggested. This results in sense of breathlessness as, even though she often eschews complex or compound sentences, the poem gathers momentum as one simple sentence follows another. Mallarmé, in contrast, had an expansive style in his poetic prose, as described by one of his later translators, Evelyn Gould:

And as one reads, so many of Mallarmé's sentences dance on, puffing themselves up with relative clauses, that the relatives become more captivating than the sense of the whole they mobilize and detail in fractions, infinitely.<sup>27</sup>

I think it is telling that Mallarmé's writing is described as becoming more captivating in fractions, as I believe this is what is intended in Atherton's and Hetherington's poetry. The layering of imagery and intertexts, whether the reader can find the key to unlock them or not, becomes, as a whole block of text, a captivating sensual experience. For example, in *Trace* (2015), the poem "Vitamin D" demonstrates Atherton's playful way of by employing homophones, associations or sideways slips in the mind through connections utilising the look or sound of a word – like pasty/pastry in the following extract – or through homonyms that create associated tangents, as demonstrated by the playful use of the word "solar," referencing both the sun and the body.

I went looking for the sun. One morning. Pasty.  
Undercooked pastry. Looking for the golden brown  
glow. I needed to feel the weight of the sun on my  
shoulders. On my solar plexus. I took a glass of milk  
and a paint brush to baste myself.<sup>28</sup>

Atherton makes great use of internal rhyme through assonance and consonance to add a sense of musicality, combined with sibilance to emphasise certain images. It is, as with much of Atherton's poetry, both unfathomable and seemingly almost in reach; the meaning is buried under layers. As one thing seems to make sense it retreats and something else is brought to the foreground. There is a neo-surreal or magical-realist quality in the image of a body being prepared as food – something surreal, unsettling or uncanny – but this is more, I suggest,

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<sup>27</sup> Evelyn Gould, "Penciling and Erasing Mallarmé's 'Ballets,'" *Performing Arts Journal* 43 (1993), 97-105.

<sup>28</sup> Atherton, *Trace*, 23.

symbolist poetics at work. The enigma created by Atherton creates the active reader response needed to find the key to unlock it, resulting in a state of reverie, or puzzling on it, when reading. The references to the body are at the centre of the poem – skin as undercooked pastry, the weight of the sun on the skin and the milk basting it – yet despite being grounded in bodily imagery, there is something out of reach in the playful associations concerning the mind. In the latter part of the poem Atherton writes, “My stripy banana lounge, / too long ago to unfold from my memory. For a while I/ thought I was well again.”<sup>29</sup> The image of a striped sun chair that can no longer be unfolded acts as an image of containment and, contrasted with the imagery of light that permeates the poem, it hints at something darker. Atherton and Hetherington detail the prose poem form as having the “capacity to articulate what is otherwise unsayable,”<sup>30</sup> and this aspect of layering and evoking, but without creating any certainty, elicits a sense of things unspoken, of things that happen outside the boundary of the poem. This places Atherton’s work within Mallarmé’s outline for his poetics.

### **The Space as a Decorative Picture in Paul Hetherington’s Poetry**

As already mentioned, Hetherington and Atherton work in ways that are similar, and there are many intersections within their work. Not only do they regularly collaborate in scholarly articles and publications, but they are also both concerned with embedding within their work references (intertexts) to art, literature and history. Hetherington can be as playful as Atherton at times, though perhaps not as directly sensual and intimate, as Atherton’s use of direct address to the reader is often provocative and elicits a sense of intimacy that draws the reader into the sexual and bodily experience of the poem. In contrast, Hetherington’s symbolist space leans

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<sup>29</sup> Atherton, *Trace*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Hetherington and Atherton, *Prose Poetry*, 9.



towards a more contemplative and distanced experience for the reader, which is often more enigmatic and puzzling. Hetherington slips between the inner and outer world of the poem so that viewpoint is sometimes located within the moment, and at others outside the space of the poem, considering what is being observed from a distance. It is a different kind of sensual intimacy and allows things to be evoked and almost grasped, but then lost. Rather than a dalliance of teasing, Hetherington's poems evoke the sensation of a curtain being lifted but then quickly dropped again; offering a brief glimpse, with no assistance for the reader to make sense of what they have seen.

Discussing Hetherington's poetry in terms of pictures not only responds to his frequent use of ekphrasis, which will be discussed shortly, but also recognises that his text boxes appear to layer images in a way that focuses on the decorative in order to create ambiguities. The prose poem is a contained space, fenced, bordered, held – or, in terms of this discussion, framed. Each description of the containment of the block of text that makes the prose poem have slightly different feelings to them and changes the perception of the poem being in the white space. Mallarmé wrote in the 1897 preface to his experimental work *Un Coup De Dés Jamais n'Abolira Le Hasard* (*A Roll of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance*) that,

The 'blanks' indeed take on importance, at first glance; the versification demands them, as a surrounding silence, to the extent that a fragment, lyrical or of a few beats, occupies, in its midst, a third of the space of paper.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup De Dés and Other Poems*, trans. A. S. Kline (Poetry in Translation, 2004-2009), 77.

This idea of surrounding silence (or contemplation) is palpably present in Hetherington's poems, even as they "continue" in their imagery and intertexts. Like pictures mounted on walls, the poems hang in space that forces focus on the decorative layering happening within the frame.

In his collection *Gallery of Antique Art*,<sup>32</sup> Hetherington visits an imagined gallery and utilises ekphrasis, which results in a meandering between viewpoints and contemplations, with the prose poems acting as framed artworks in the gallery space. Ekphrasis is a useful working technique for poets seeking to use a symbolist approach, as the subject is veiled from the beginning by the other artist who created the artwork. Consequently, it can allow transformation of image into words whilst describing an already enigmatic subject, creating an immediate layering effect. In the collection, the gallery presents a space to travel through, and an ending (leaving the gallery) but the reader is encouraged to deviate from the prescribed route; to turn back to puzzle out the mysteries that are created through the subjectivity of the poems. That Hetherington closes with a question, "Who is he? you gestured/as he stepped left and out of sight,"<sup>33</sup> emphasises the ambiguities present in the text, and the inherent unknowing that is left in the reader as imagery and slippage between observer and observed is played out.

The poems are ordered in this collection to replicate passing through certain rooms and spaces so that the reader can journey through the gallery. However, Hetherington does not just clinically reproduce what is on view like a tour guide, standing at a distance from the paintings. The viewpoint is constantly moving through the present moment, back in time, and forward into unanswered questions. Images encountered are observed, or the history depicted is

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<sup>32</sup> Hetherington, Paul. *Gallery of Antique Art* (Canberra: Recent Work Press, 2016).

<sup>33</sup> Hetherington, *Gallery of Antique Art*, 47.

discussed, or the context of the painter's life pondered upon. Always, the curtain is lifted and dropped over the frame of the prose poem, so that a painting in the poem *Tenth Room* can contain both the historical subject and the suggestion it depicts the narrative voice's daughter. This enigmatic approach makes each poem expand further than the frame of poem, into layers of history, allusions, and perplexing moments. There are also descriptions that remind the reader of the experience of being in the gallery in a bodily way, standing quietly, stumbling on flagstones. The gallery in the poem *Main Corridor* becomes a warning metaphor for the pursuit of "depictions of the ideal,"<sup>34</sup> with the meandering corridors articulating the expansiveness with no end that idealist art might demand or inflict.

The "interludes" poems, the café and garden, are constructed to be framed in a thinner block on the page in contrast to the others and are formatted in italic. Unlike the main poems from the gallery, which slip between observation and experience, the thinner poems are more permeable in the way Hetherington depicts layered spaces and involves the reader in the text. The painting or sculpture described absorbs the narrative voice and the reader in a more demanding way, as if speaking to the reader or a particular "you" to create intimacy and inclusion, and the streams of images are more enigmatic as they blend historical, mythical, and artistic facts. For example, in "Statues," "Rooms possessed us, their statues/ walking with hundreds of stiff-/gaited farewells. History gathered/ us into Penelope's loom."<sup>35</sup> Here, as in other poems, Hetherington acts as a perplexing and distant guide, and provides information but confusion which the reader will have to actively seek to understand.

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<sup>34</sup> Hetherington, *Gallery of Antique Art*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Hetherington, *Gallery of Antique Art*, 21.

Both Hetherington and Atherton utilise intertexts and layering, fragmentation and montage, to create the symbolist poetic space of suggestion and decoration. In the *Gallery of Antique Art*, the reader is an invited visitor within a public setting. By contrast, in *Palace of Memory: An Elegy*, Hetherington brings the reader into a personal memoir. Rather than observing art, it is memory that is placed on the walls of white space; portraits of remembered things, hauntings of childhood. The first poem begins with the line, “Worn stones support facades/ with the cold press of forgetfulness – so much moss and/ lichen-covered ruin,”<sup>36</sup> establishing the atmosphere for the journey through the collection; a sense of crumbling time passing, slipping through the mind. Throughout the collection, memories are, I suggest, addressed like pictures, so that the aspect of using ekphrasis as a method to create described (or interpreted) artworks for the reader works in the same way as in the art gallery. Poem titled as number 3 lists elements of a scene as if setting the picture in the mind of reader with little fuss, making it clear for them. Yet it slips into enigma: “A dim way. Tall, curtained/ windows rising, like my father. Every shadow’s an adhesive/stain [...]”

The collection is permeated with an air of lamentation for things slipping, in keeping with the “Elegy” of the book’s subtitle, and a sense of not being able to hold on to or pin in place the memories that are uncovered for the reader:

Gates and alleys of the mind/ are open. In this dusk silence holds the moon as if  
it’s a /chunk of something broken— it might be love [...] <sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Hetherington, *Palace of Memory: An Elegy* (Canberra: Recent Work Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>37</sup> Hetherington, *Palace of Memory*, 52.

Like the art gallery and its endless rooms and corridors, surrounded by art to view and absorb, in this collection Hetherington displays memories on the walls as the reader has to open gates and move through the alleys of the mind. The reader can traverse and get lost in here, faced with uncertainties, seeking understanding.

In poem 26, Hetherington writes that, “Memory says we were never/ together there,”<sup>38</sup> personifying memory and adding to the sense of unease. There is something uncanny about the image of memory speaking to one directly, an unreliable yet persuasive commentator destabilising prose poems built upon layers of history, misremembering, and a sense of trespass. The veiling created by using the technique of ekphrasis in the art gallery poems, with the subject already veiled by the artist who created the work, is now veiled through time and the personal nature of the memories. Memories can be fallible, withheld from the reader, or revealed through suggestion. The recollections are particular and personal, yet also written in a way to be intimate for the reader to slip into these memory rooms, with the sense of imposing or domestic spaces – “Columns, hallways, the room where they’d waited [...]”<sup>39</sup> – allowing the reader, too, to travel back in time. These examples highlight Hetherington’s use of symbolist techniques in order to focus on the decorative and ambiguous, painting specific ekphrastic memory pictures, replicating them for the reader but deliberately using suggestion in order to remain enigmatic. The poems contain hints, echoes and edges, almost revealing, but then the curtain is dropped over the frame once more.

## Conclusion and Suggestions for Finding the Decorative-Subjective Space in Practice

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<sup>38</sup> Hetherington, *Palace of Memory*, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Hetherington, *Palace of Memory*, 27.

This chapter has explored the use of different methods to convey a sense of “continuing” for the reader, reaching beyond the space of the poem into a wider, almost endless, space of suggestion and allusion. Using intertexts and ekphrasis, the poet can layer and fragment images to create depth, condensing meaning and suggestion within the prescribed, limited space of the prose poem. The reader is invited into active engagement with the poem as they attempt to find the key to unlock the puzzle and what it suggests. Whether it is a playful dalliance with the reader or contemplative hiding and revealing, the poets are using symbolist techniques to create a sensual space that results, in Mallarmé’s terms, in a reverie, as the reader seeks to understand what is being hinted at. As Hetherington and Atherton use direct address or slip between points of view, they engage the reader in being both clinical observer and sensual voyeur. Both poets in the collections discussed utilise intimate use of pronouns to create a sense of inclusion for the reader, with layers that are nonetheless uncertain, so that reader remains continually off guard and disorientated, negotiating the anxiety of space generated by symbolist techniques.

The prose poem form, as an original symbolist space, can be layered with the techniques discussed above; namely, decorativeness and subjectivity through the methods of ekphrasis and intertextuality, resulting in a decorative-subjective contemporary symbolist approach that goes beyond merely employing the prose poem form. By employing this approach, these contemporary symbolist poems engender the intended reverie of enigma as the reader seeks the key to understanding.

Within my own practice, as I worked on the imagined memoir of the life the symbolist artist Pamela Colman Smith, I experimented with the methods I have identified in Atherton’s and Hetherington’s work. I found that defining these methods as contemporary symbolist practice

and viewing them through this particular lens in order to illuminate a commonality between them was a way of taking the ineffable qualities of symbolist poetics and transforming them into a practical, craftsperson approach. These became my tools. Layering history and memoir and utilising intertextuality and ekphrasis as my main techniques engendered a “Mallarmesque” fog to envelop my poetry; but far from this being, as it was for Auden, a negative characteristic, it provided a vital means of evoking the point of view of a symbolist artist and encouraging the reader to take an active part in the poems as they seek out the key to the glimpsed and suggested meaning. Perhaps the reader will find the key, or perhaps not, yet I hope that the engagement will provide a delectable pleasure nonetheless.

Asleep, I can hear the spider walking across the ceiling. The legs patter, louder than the percussion section of the orchestra. It is not the anecdote I wanted to begin with. Who is leading the spider? Does it wear a collar, a velvet girdle? If you keep a velvet ribbon in your pocket it is ready for any occasion: a garter to tie around a plump thigh or a noose to attach to the bar of the window. I can hear you thinking, what is the colour of the ribbon? Why does it always come back to colour? Ariadne’s hair was black as soot scraped from the hearth. Elaine’s skin was white as she lay back in her boat to die. Iseult’s lips were naturally red, not tinted with rose petals. Olivia, dear one, beneath the terracotta sheet of our makeshift tent your veins stood out in blue lines; rivers racing to the sea. Ursula prowls the forest for honey.