

A Genealogy of the Prose Poem

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Abstract:

This article looks at aspects of the genealogy of the prose poem. It does so by tracing correspondences, across a range of texts, in the ways by which characters and writers record themselves ‘profoundly sensible’ of an ‘awful parenthesis that had suspended them’, as De Quincey put it, in a place and in a moment of time. The experience of insulation, sequestration, and deep recesses, and then the looping together of ideas of suspension, trance, and syncope are witnessed at work in texts by Dickens, De Quincey, Baudelaire, Henry Mayhew, and Tim Dee, with patterns of influence or similarity discerned therein that are all suggestive of the prose poem’s dynamics of containment *and* extension. Reference is made to representations of this involving both city and field, and to the poetic styles, including parallelism, that work to evoke encroaching *and* receding horizons.

Keywords: prose poem, city, field, parallelism, Dickens, De Quincey, Baudelaire, Turgenev, Tim Dee, John Berger.

One of the main points I want to make in this essay about the prose poem comes out of reading something which isn’t a prose poem, but a passage from a novel. The novel is Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, published in the weekly *All the Year Round* between 1 December 1860 and 3 August 1861, and the passage I’m interested in was published on 11 May 1861. It concerns one of the most momentous narrative junctures in the novel: momentous because it describes a protracted moment, but also because it records a life-changing experience. The experience is that of passing from a state of self-possession to that of being effectively the property of another, and it hinges on the management of time:

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Alterations have been made in that part of the Temple since that time, and it has not now so lonely a character as it had then, nor is it so exposed to the river. We lived at the top of the last house, and the wind rushing up the river shook the house that night, like discharges of cannon, or breakings of a sea. When the rain came with it and dashed against the windows, I thought, raising my eyes to them as they rocked, that I might have fancied myself in a storm-beaten light-house. Occasionally, the smoke came rolling down the chimney as though it could not bear to go out into such a night; and when I set the doors open and looked down the staircase, the staircase lamps were blown out; and when I shaded my face with my hands and looked through the black windows (opening them ever so little, was out of the question in the teeth of such wind and rain) I saw that the lamps in the court were blown out, and that the lamps on the bridges and the shore were shuddering, and that the coal fires in barges on the river were being carried away before the wind like red-hot splashes in the rain.

I read with my watch upon the table, purposing to close my book at eleven o'clock. As I shut it, Saint Paul's, and all the many church-clocks in the City—some leading, some accompanying, some following—struck that hour. The sound was curiously flawed by the wind; and I was listening, and thinking how the wind assailed and tore it, when I heard a footstep on the stair. (Dickens 1965 [1861]: 331–2)

The passage describes a spell of time, stepping out of the main narrative flow of the novel and setting up some boundaries that keep at bay the pace and rhythm of that flow, before stepping back into it with the sound of a literal step upon the stair. Pip, the narrator, is comfortably in control of his own timetable—he puts his own watch upon the table, and sets aside a precise amount of time for reading—but the comfort he takes from being able to choose the order of his life is about to be revealed as complacent and illusory, since the step upon the stair brings the knowledge that Magwitch has devised a completely different and conflicting schedule for Pip's sense of direction and purpose, completely altering his understanding of the relations between his past, present, and future. This is the moment when one schedule is engulfed by the other, when several possible futures disappear. And this dramatic change of time signature is backed by the striking of the hour at different times by different churches, disclosing a hinterland of different temporal measures, a multiplication of plans and frameworks for living, a plurality of different stories contained by the city, whose sheer volume and lack of coordination are overpowering to the solitary individual.

Pip himself emphasises his solitude; his actions reveal a desire for solitude, a need to retreat from interference. Dickens puts him on the *top* floor of the *last* house and makes him imagine, retrospectively, that it must be like dwelling in a lighthouse, in a living space whose confinement and remoteness from the rest of humanity is what makes it attractive; his rooms have windows, but they are all black; the buildings have lamps, but they have all gone out; there is no visual evidence of anyone else alive, or of any living thing, for that matter; only the fugitive gleams of a few primeval flares, 'red-hot splashes' being carried down the river as if on a flow of lava.

And in this physical and imaginative isolation—there is just Pip among the elements—the most appropriate action for Pip to perform is reading; he shuts out the disorientating spatial dimensions of the city, focusing on the small space of the book; and he shuts out the confused and confusing temporal dimensions of the city, by tethering the minutes and the hours to his own watch, and by entering the time of reading; what Pip is reading is another text than the one he is in, *Great Expectations*; and the kind of text he needs, even if he does not know it is what he wants, must be something like a prose poem.

Why do I say this? In 1860, during the year in which the serialisation of *Great Expectations* commenced, James Hogg published the last of his *Selections Grave and Gay from writings published and unpublished* of Thomas de Quincey. It included De Quincey's essay 'On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*', which asks the reader to compare the effect of the knocking with the experience of being 'in a vast metropolis on the day when some great national idol was carried in funeral pomp to his grave', resulting in 'the silence and desertion of the streets' and 'the stagnation of ordinary business'. De Quincey then focuses on the relevant scene in *Macbeth* in terms that are strikingly close to those employed by Dickens in the passage from *Great Expectations* just given:

In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers, and the murder, must be insulated—cut off by an immeasurable gulph from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs—locked up and sequestered in some deep recess: we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into a dread armistice: time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. Hence it is that when the deed is done—when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish: the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them. (De Quincey 1985 [1823]: 6–7)

De Quincey's emphasis on insulation, sequestration, and deep recesses; his looping together of ideas of suspension, trance, syncope; and his breaking of the spell with the return of hearing and the insistence of the knocking that recalls the ordinary rhythm of time marked by the ticking of the clock or the chiming of the bell—reminding us also of the tremendous forward momentum of the dramatic action in *Macbeth*—all these features are at the centre of Dickens's passage written a few months after the book publication of the essay. But what is also at the centre of De Quincey's essay, but not mentioned, in fact effaced, is that the cessation of all the goings-on of the world in which we have to live, according to measures and rhythms imposed upon us by others, is occasioned not only by the work of darkness, but also—and for De Quincey especially—by the workings of opium: by its ability to estrange us from our familiar

routines, surroundings, and relations, and even from our own bodies, imprinted with the actions and reactions of the habitual.

The syntactical structure of De Quincey's rendition of the trance is itself a performance of extenuation, of delay; of prevarication through paraphrase and revision; withholding the moment when the sentence completes itself and breaks the illusion. The text seems to be mesmerised by its own ability to spin things out; what Ruth apRoberts refers to in her essay on Biblical parallelism in English prose as 'self-exegesis' (1997: 987–1004).

At the same time that Dickens was working on *Great Expectations*, that other opium-eater, Baudelaire, was composing some of his most important prose poems. He did this while working simultaneously on his enthusiastic translations of De Quincey, whose work he was thoroughly familiar with. In 1862, the year following the publication of the Dickens passage we have just looked at, Baudelaire completed one of his most arresting *Petits Poèmes en prose*, 'La Chambre Double' ['The Twofold Room']. For the sake of convenience, I am giving this in the English translation by Francis Scarfe and shortening it to about half its total length. I don't think this shorter version seriously misrepresents the whole, and it amounts to something like a concertina version of the full text:

A room just like a daydream, a truly spiritual room, in which the unmoving air is faintly tinged with rosiness and blue.

In it the soul enjoys a bath of stillness, a bath scented with regret and desire. It has something of twilight about it, bluish and roseate, a voluptuous dream in an eclipse.

The furniture takes elongated shapes, prostrate and languorous. Each piece seems to be dreaming, as if living in a state of trance, like vegetable and mineral things. The draperies speak an unvoiced language, like flowers and skies and setting suns . . .

To what well-wishing demon am I indebted for being surrounded in this way by mystery and silence, peace and perfumes? What bliss? What we commonly call life, even at its most generous moments of euphoria has nothing to compare with this life of lives, which now I know and savour minute by minute and second after second.

No—there are no more minutes, no seconds any more—Time has vanished away, Eternity reigns—an eternity of delights!

But suddenly a terrible, heavy thump resounded on the door, and as in some hellish nightmare I felt as though I had just received a blow from a pick-axe, in the pit of my stomach.

And then a ghost came in—perhaps some bailiff come to torment me in the name of the law, or a shameless concubine to whine about her poverty and add the trivialities of her existence to the sufferings of my own, or some editor's errand-boy demanding the next instalment of copy.

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The room which was heaven on earth, and the Idol, the Queen of Dreams—the Sylphide as Chateaubriand used to say—all that magic has vanished with the ghost's brutal hammering on the door.

How horrible—now I remember everything. Yes, this hovel, this home of everlasting boredom, is indeed my own. Look, there are the fatuous bits of junk, my dusty and chipped furniture; the fireless hearth with not even a glowing ember in the grate all fouled with spit; the dingy windows down which the rain has scrawled runnels in the grime; the manuscripts riddled with cross-outs or left half done; the calendar on which the evil days of reckoning are underlined in pencil . . . (Baudelaire 1989: 37–9)

This is already beginning to look like familiar territory: the bracketing of everyday existence, the yearning for a form of suspended animation, the exclusion of others, and the inevitable incursion of change and decay; once again in the form of officious time, with its remorseless tread and its rap on the door. Both Dickens and De Quincey enter this backwater in time and space by withdrawing from the hubbub of the city into a place deserted by others; De Quincey imagines a street that has been emptied out and then makes it re-form, as in a dream or a story by Kafka, into a hiding place that fails in its purpose of staving off the moment when the self is called to account. Dickens shows us his protagonist choosing internal exile in order to escape from others' stories into one of his own choosing. But both are returned to the narrative or dramatic structures that will carry them off into a future dividing them from their own projects.

In the case of Baudelaire, the over-arching narrative structure is withheld; or rather, several possible narrative structures are hinted at, without being fully disclosed, and none is given priority over the others; the prose poem quarantines itself from what lies outside it, refuses to affiliate itself to a larger context, but then does little else besides refer to these extraneous things precisely as traces, shadows and echoes. It sets boundaries to itself in order not to attract the attention of the authorities; which is to say, the kind of power that is wielded by conventional forms of sense-making; but it then exhausts itself in imagining the various ways in which those boundaries might be breached. The prose poem can only hold its ground within a confined space; a space small enough to monitor and control. And the method of confinement; of tactical down-sizing was learned by Baudelaire during the greatly protracted task of translating De Quincey. De Quincey's ruminative prose was reined in and corralled; translation involved systematic paraphrase and de-selection; which is to say that long passages were routinely summarised and reduced to a precis of themselves, while other passages were simply replaced with a Baudelairean mimicry of De Quinceyan style. This was not translation so much as adaptation, the production of a French simulacrum of De Quincey, that was not atypical of translation methods in use at the time.

And it was not atypical of De Quincey's own writing methods, or rather of his editing methods, since he constantly re-ordered and reconfigured his own texts, frequently dismembering them in order to re-direct and re-deploy fragments in alternative contexts, a practice that gave the excerpt partial independence and a

somewhat estranged and more ghostly relation to context; the orphaned De Quinceyan paragraph may be seen as one of the formative gestures towards the evolution of the prose poem.

A certain amount of writing has been devoted to the intimate relationship between the prose poem and the city. Nikki Santilli, in her very busy study of the genre, relates the miniaturisation of literary form in the mid-nineteenth century to what she calls the diminution of space during the industrial age, pointing both to urban overcrowding and to what she describes as ‘the gradual encroachment of the horizon’ (Santilli 2002: 185). There is a persuasive neatness to this, although the same pressure results in a mania for detecting and establishing hidden connections between far-flung components of the urban system – revealing that it is one vast system – when evident connections are lacking; and the preferred mode of writing for this includes some of the longest novels in the language – while it might be said that the prose poem is one very significant symptom of a desire to cut connections, and shrink the horizon almost to an extent that makes it disappear altogether. Baudelaire’s prose poem ‘The Twofold Room’ gives extra valency to the project of cutting connections by threatening to eclipse it with its double. One room resists the incursion of outside forces while the other succumbs to the pressure of other people’s needs, but the two rooms are same room occupying two different sets of textual relations. The agents of entanglement bring with them unknown numbers of different narrative threads that threaten to proliferate, on the Dickensian model, while the occupant of the room barricaded by his own aversion has only to glimpse one such thread in order to drop it altogether. The latter version of the room has the shape of the prose poem. Santilli traces the symbiosis of the prose poem and the city up to the very recent past, as far as Charles Tomlinson and Roy Fisher, but her conceptualisation of the urban environment remains tied to the conditions of the industrial age. When the twentieth-century prose poem decides to predicate its own concept of the city, this can take a very different form, under the influence of a different awareness of the city made possible by aerial observation, which not only restores the city to its place within the horizon, but also encompasses it within the aerial photograph.

This perspective on the city first becomes possible in the middle of the nineteenth century. Henry Mayhew’s remarkable account of the appearance of London seen from a balloon has him marvelling at the miniaturisation of the streets and buildings, and of the humans moving within and between them like the ‘animalcules in cheese’:

In the opposite direction to that in which the wind was insensibly wafting the balloon, lay the leviathan Metropolis, with a dense canopy of smoke hanging over it, and reminding one of the fog of vapour that is often seen steaming up from the fields at early morning. It was impossible to tell where the monster city began or ended, for the buildings stretched not only to the horizon on either side, but far away into the distance, where, owing to the coming shades of evening and the dense fumes from the million chimneys, the town seemed to blend into the sky, so that there was no distinguishing earth from heaven. The multitude of roofs that extended back from the foreground was positively like a dingy

red sea, heaving in bricken billows, and the seeming waves rising up one after the other till the eye grew wearied with following them. Here and there we could distinguish little bare green patches of parks, and occasionally make out the tiny circular enclosures of the principal squares, though, from the height, these appeared scarcely bigger than wafers. Further, the fog of smoke that over-shadowed the giant town was pierced with a thousand steeples and pin-like factory-chimneys.

That little building, no bigger than one of the small china houses that are used for burning pastilles in, is Buckingham Palace—with St James's Park, dwindled to the size of a card table, stretched out before it. Yonder is Bethlehem Hospital, with its dome, now about the same dimensions as a bell.

Then the little mites of men, crossing the bridges, seemed to have no more motion in them than the animalcules in cheese; while the streets appeared more like cracks in the soil than highways, and the tiny steamers on the river were only to be distinguished by the thin black trail of smoke trailing after them. (Mayhew 1852)

Mayhew's response to London, to the unprecedented extent of its urban sprawl, imagines and projects limits to its relentless expansion, searching for signs of restraint and containment in the outlines of parks and the 'enclosures' of squares. He replaces his view of the smoke-laden built environment with a vision of land that is an architectural tabula rasa, the mist-laden fields of the English countryside. The prose poem's affiliation to the measure provided by the borders of a field is something I will come to later on. Mayhew's fascination with London's radical uncontainability is twinned with an equally radical desire to reverse its growth and undo its construction, so that it might revert to the condition of matter on the first day of creation, prior to the separation of land from sea.

The altitude attained by Mayhew's balloon is not quite high enough for him to be able to engross the whole of London, and thus bring it under some degree of visual control, but in the twentieth century it would become possible to enclose entire cities within the modest framework of a photograph. Twentieth-century prose poems are not simply aerial views, of course, but perhaps the visual homogenisation of the city has assisted the move towards encapsulating the city in terms of its pattern or structure, which the prose poet displays after hovering over its activity or discourse until the secret of its operations and the defining aspects of its character should reveal themselves.

Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* consists entirely of descriptions of dozens of imaginary cities each of which has its own overall character that is revealed only when the narrator finds the correct detail with which to prise it open. This is the complete text of 'Cities and the Sky: 3':

Those who arrive at Thekla can see little of the city, beyond the plank fences, the sackcloth screens, the scaffoldings, the metal armatures, the wooden catwalks hanging from ropes or supported by sawhorses, the ladders, the trestles. If you ask, 'Why is Thekla's construction taking such a long time?' the inhabitants continue hoisting sacks, lowering leaded strings, moving long brushes up and down, as they answer, 'So that its destruction cannot begin.' And if asked whether they fear that, once the scaffoldings are

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removed, the city may begin to crumble and fall to pieces, they add hastily, in a whisper, 'Not only the city.'

If, dissatisfied with the answers, someone puts his eye to a crack in a fence, he sees cranes pulling up other cranes, scaffoldings that embrace other scaffoldings, beams that prop up other beams. 'What meaning does your construction have?' he asks. 'What is the aim of a city under construction unless it is a city? Where is the plan you are following, the blueprint?'

'We will show it to you as soon as the working day is over; we cannot interrupt our work now,' they answer.

Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars. 'There is the blueprint,' they say. (Calvino 1997 [1972]: 115)

In one sense, this text simply extrapolates from the material reality of cities, that are never in a state of completion but always being added to, subtracted from, and repeatedly revised. But the materials of *Thekla* all have the aspect of an elaborate disguise, hiding the true nature of the city, which can only be perceived with the right angle of vision, the unobtrusive device that will reveal the principles of its construction. They mirror the textual strategies of Calvino's writing, withholding the clue that will lead the way out of the labyrinth, except that the clue leads to the understanding that the labyrinth is endless. Finding the keyhole, turning the key in the door, and opening the door leads only to a *mise en abîme*.

Once again, the confinement of the prose poem, that favours the microscopic scrutiny of tiny details, is balanced against the awareness that there are entire constellations of similar details awaiting similar treatment. Perhaps the majority of Calvino's cities are flimsy and precarious structures, as if owning up to, and even parading, the fact that they are no more than imaginary, and seem to propose that all cities attain their identities only in the imaginary constructions of their inhabitants and visitors, each of whom invents a city different from all others.

Calvino's text comes to an end by drawing the veil of darkness over itself, as do all the texts of the *Invisible Cities* book, whether or not they mention their diurnal status, since each one is delivered as a daily report to Kubla Khan by the traveller Marco Polo, who may be describing actual places he has visited, but is much more likely to be inventing them, just as the historical Marco Polo has been credited with a fertile imagination, and the poetical Kubla Khan has been associated with the desire to build fantastical structures. Polo tells his stories to remain in the Khan's favours, just as Scheherezade returns every day to the task of delaying her own story's end. The prose poem lives on a day to day basis for a different reason, so as not to become caught up in a larger structure alien to its own purpose. Turgenev started writing prose poems in the 1860s and advised his readers to read them one a day, so as not to allow them to bleed into one another and coalesce (Turgenev 1945 [1878]: vi).

What I want to end by arguing – although I haven't reached the end yet – is that the contemporary prose poem is far from resorting to the city as the ideal setting enabling it to accentuate and even dramatise its attempt to quarantine itself from the tyrannies of

narrative; that in fact it is in contemporary nature writing – or one conspicuous strain of it – with its intervention into temporal and spatial measures far more immense than those of any city, that the need has been felt to create temporal and spatial lairs – to be territorial in perhaps every sense. From my point of view the best contemporary writing about nature actually domesticates it, in the process of estranging the domestic; as in the reined-in ruminations of Tim Dee’s recent book, *Four Fields*:

Indoors, looked at from the field, seemed at best to be talk about life instead of life itself. Rather than living under the sun it fizzed – if it fizzed at all – parasitically or secondarily, with batteries, on printed pages, and in flickering images. I realized this around 1968 in my seven-year-old way. At the same time, however, I learned that I needed the indoor world to make the outdoors be something more than simply everything I wasn’t. I saw it was true that indoor talk helped the outdoor world come alive and could of itself be living and lovely, too. Words about birds made birds live as more than words. Jane Eyre, held inside by bad weather, takes Thomas Bewick’s *History of British Birds* to the window and reads looking out into the wind and rain.

...

Without fields – no us. Without us – no fields. So it has come to seem to me. ‘This green plot shall be our stage,’ says Peter Quince in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Fields were there at our beginning and they are growing still. *Earth* half-rhymes with *life* and half-rhymes with *death*. Every day, countless incarnations of our oldest history are played out in a field down any road from wherever we are. Yet these acres of shaped growing earth, telling our shared story over and over, are so ordinary, ubiquitous and banal that we have – mostly – stopped noticing them as anything other than substrate or backdrop, the green crayon-line across the bottom of every child’s drawing. It is in the nature of all commonplaces that they are overlooked, in both senses of the word: fields are everywhere but we don’t see them for they are too familiar and homely; being the stage and not the show, they are trodden underfoot, and no one seeks them out, no one gives a sod. For Walt Whitman, prairie-dreamer of the great lawn of men, grass fitted us and suited; it was a ‘uniform hieroglyphic’. It grew and stood for us and, because it goes where we are, we tread where it grows. Yet because it meant everything it could easily mean nothing. (Dee 2014: 2–3)

Dee’s writing is all about scaling nature down by bringing inside the world outside, and by managing the relationship through a series of frames; moving outside the perimeters of the page, the screen, the window and the room by extending the principle of framing out into nature itself and restricting the field of vision to the vision allowed by the perimeters of the field. The field, with its hedgerow, earthen bank or fence, is equivalent to Calvino’s crack in the fence; an aperture through which to bring into focus nature’s seemingly endless process of construction and dereliction. Dee’s own emotional conviction is that life itself is found outdoors; that time spent indoors is a period of exile from the natural habitat; that life in a room is temporary imprisonment, it is where one exists in a protracted state of divided attention: ‘reading looking out’. But his writing does almost the opposite; when his writing goes out into the field,

it simply expands the measures of containment; it represents him looking out, and looking around, as if he is engaged in reading; his observations in the field stick to the arrangements on the page with edges defined by human history. Robert Macfarlane is engaged in a related activity, collecting the local glossaries for outdoor features and phenomena, in a range of different parts of the British archipelago. The reach of the dialect is the expanded field of community, whose ‘talk about life’ is what governs their attention to what lies around them: ‘Without fields – no us. Without us – no fields.’

This stylistic parallelism, often involving symmetry and reversal, and alert to the echoing possibilities of rhyme and half-rhyme, gives the organisation of Dee’s text the aspect of a set of adjacent units that are structurally related but self-contained, like a group of adjoining fields: ‘Words about birds made birds live as more than words’; ‘It grew and stood for us and, because it goes where we are, we tread where it grows’; ‘Yet because it meant everything it could easily mean nothing.’ The balance in these phrases and clauses, the assonance and alliteration, and the occasional use of a caesura-like turning point in the sentence, combine elements of several rhetorical and poetic traditions; imposing a vertical grid on top of the horizontal grid that normally controls our reading of a prose text.

This *poetic* drawing together of the elements of the text, so that they face inwards, strengthening the relations involved in the experience of reading the page, *especially* when these are concerned with looking out, is even more actively pursued in John Berger’s remarkable text, ostensibly an essay, entitled ‘Field’:

Shelf of a field, green, within easy reach, the grass on it not yet high, papered with blue sky through which yellow has grown to make pure green, the surface colour of what the basin of the world contains, attendant field, shelf between sky and sea, fronted with a curtain of printed trees, friable at its edges, the corners of it rounded, answering the sun with heat, shelf on a wall through which from time to time a cuckoo is audible, shelf on which she keeps the invisible and intangible jars of her pleasure, field that I have always known, I am lying raised up on one elbow wondering whether in any direction I can see beyond where you stop. The wire around you is the horizon.

Remember what it was like to be sung to sleep. If you are fortunate, the memory will be more recent than childhood. The repeated lines of words and music are like paths. These paths are circular and the rings they make are linked together like those of a chain. You walk along these paths and are led by them in circles which lead from one to the other, further and further away. The field upon which you walk and upon which the chain is laid is the song. (Berger 2009: 69)

The first word of the first paragraph here introduces a collocation of vocabulary that we allocate in the first instance to the realm of metaphor: shelf, wallpaper, basin, curtain, wall, jar. Just grouping these words together is enough to make the metaphorical application seem tenuous, and by the time we have reached the end of the first paragraph, in our first reading of the text, we have reassigned all these words to a literal function. At some point in our reading we hesitate between the literal and

the metaphorical alternatives, and it is that hesitation which tells the truth about our dependence on frames and perimeters, on the various limitations we feel the need to impose on our assimilation of the world outdoors, on that enormous context always ready to swallow up our significance, not just as individuals, but as entire species.

The concept of the field seems always to be there, ready and waiting – ‘attendant’ – to such an extent that it seems ‘I have always known it’, which is to say, we have all always known it; our dependence on it such that we cannot see, and can only barely conceive of, what lies beyond, even though the evidence of our senses apart from vision interferes with our choice of horizon.

The prose poem is modernity’s response not to an encroaching horizon but to our fear of the receding horizon, whose growing distance increases our share of the unknown. It is the circle we draw around our interactions with the world, in imitation of the literal wire that surrounds our fields, and the literal walls that compose our rooms; a circle drawn with the music of words; chains of words and concepts whose concentric rings repeat themselves in radiating out towards one text after another for at least the last 150 years.

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