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To see: a literary ecological point of view (some Australian examples of ecocritical creative writing, with particular emphasis on the prose poem)

Abstract:

‘An ecologically-informed point of view’, says Wendy Wheeler (2006: 91), is one ‘that sees all life, including culture, as naturally co-evolved and interdependent’. We can be unconscious of the fact that we are ‘embodied creatures’ for whom ‘the natural world ... is the ground-state’ (Wheeler 2006: 91). Constantly distracted by the mass of human-engineered activity, we have lost, Clive Hamilton says, our imagination, and the imagery to inspire an appropriate responsiveness (2005: 191). Beverley Farmer’s innovative ecocritical writing in ‘Mouths of gold’ (2005), with its nonlinear, associative structure and hybrid nature enfolded the prose poem, reveals her exemplary practice of seeing what is. Like the prose poem, the essay without a straightforward, linear structure requires focus and time to make your way through it and to understand what it is offering. John Tomlinson has noted that time itself is neither linear-progressive nor cyclic; it has accidents and surprises in store and is constituted by profound rifts and forks (2007). These rifts in time make us aware of the contingency of our existence. Survival and successful adaptation in environments that are in crisis in the early twenty-first century will require a constant reflexive re-balancing, an experimental approach, a strategy of improvisation.

Biographical note:

Moya Costello teaches Writing in the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University. She has published two collections of short creative prose (*Kites in Jakarta* and *Small ecstasies*), and one novella (*The office as a boat*). Most recently, her short creative prose has been published in the journal *Etchings*, and the anthologies *Small wonder* and *Stoned crows*. Previously, she has had many journal (scholarly and art/literary) and anthology publications. She has co-edited a number of anthologies of creative writing.

Keywords:

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It was so fundamental – this action: to see or look (Gibson 2012: 26).

In the opening quote, above, Ross Gibson is talking about the language and practices of the Eora peoples, Indigenous to Sydney Cove, as perceived by the newly arrived astronomer, Willam Dawes, in 1788. My discipline is creative writing, and as a creative writer, the ‘rules’ of behaviour are that you observe and record/remember, and look for the potential of narrative in a whole array of experiences, events and images, or, to put it another way, ‘to develop the habit of art’ (Jolley 1996: 59). Helen Garner said that the writer with the ‘fiercely over-developed observing eye ... must notice, they have to stare coolly, and see, and remember, and collect’ (1996: 141). As an academic also, in the twentieth-first century, I have been concerned to learn, write and teach ecocriticism. My concern arises from ‘the anxieties of a planet in crisis’ (Potter 2005), for Clive Hamilton notes that:

the reluctant conclusion of the most eminent climate scientists is that the world is now on a path to a very unpleasant future and it is too late to stop it ... global warming ... will this century bring about a radically transformed world that is much more hostile to the survival and flourishing of life (2010: vii-xi).

Although ‘nature writing’ has a long history, Wendy Wheeler describes ecocriticism specifically as a ‘new critical formation’ (2006: 101) coming in the last decade of the twentieth century. My understanding is that art, and literature specifically, has a role to play in the planet’s survival. Emily Potter has stated with stalwart courage that ‘literary poetics’, ‘far from [being] irrelevant’, ‘can claim an engagement’ with planetary crises (2005). Lawrence Buell argues for the productive relationship of imaginative literature in particular and the environment, describing the imagination as ‘at least as fundamental as scientific research, technological know-how and legislative regulation’ (2005: 5) as a key to today’s environmental crises.

My first conscious learnings about ecocriticism came from two Australian writers. The first was Eric Rolls and his writing on a grass native to Sydney (1996), the capital of New South Wales (NSW), one of Australia’s seven states and territories. The grass is *Themeda triandra*, Kangaroo Grass, the dominant grass around Sydney before white invasion/settlement.

Because of the habit of writing, I work with observation. The first step in observing, noticing or seeing might be ‘disattending from what is internalised’, writes Wheeler, in order to recognise what is ‘significant ... new and strange’ (2006: 135). For ‘attending to scenes and events spawn[s] ... dream worlds’ writes Kathleen Stewart (2007: 10). Scenes and events constitute the ordinary, which is always about what possibilities arise from the ‘amass[ing] resonance in things’ (Stewart 2007: 12).

There is also a link between seeing and slowing the pace of movement (Radywyl 2009). Stillness can draw us ‘into the world differently’, enabling us to access ‘new agencies and movement’ (Bissell and Fuller 2009). As John-David Dewsbury says, stillness is not about a ‘simply there’ but, rather, a ‘there is’: ‘a neutral, incessant, interminable presencing that questions us into being: “what are we doing here?”’ (2009). Poet Naomi Horridge says, for example, that ‘waiting, listening, holding back, loosening up and giving time and space to what is happening right now are enabling tactics for writing about place’ (2011: 8).

The following is my attempt to see *Themeda*: we may as well start from the ground up, if not underground, with a species among the more-than-human often considered in common parlance to be mundane:

On a day of light breezes, *Themeda*'s swaying long, thin green or gone-to-yellow single stems swoosh softly in their brushing against each other, bowing their heads, bending forward, back, to the side, like lithe-limbed dancers, multiple fairy bodies, crowned gracefully with a fan of three spikes, and around the spikes the red-based black 'hairs' becoming prominent as the spikes turn yellow, papery, then grey like ash, a dense feather (Costello 2004: 96).

In Sydney, *Themeda triandra* was supplanted by Spear and Wire grasses, *Stipa* and *Aristida*. Here is Horridge performing, perhaps only the way poetry or poetic prose can, an encounter with the more-than-human, Spear grass:

... To speak
Peggy's painting:
grasslands she has brushed
with camels hair ...
I should have to
Exhale 'grass, grass, grass
Grass' a thousand times (2011: 7).

Tessa Chudy has written a novel of poetic prose, if not exactly the prose poem, and her interest is in bladey grass in particular, but more generally in an exploration of the relationship between people and the environment, and 'the environment ... as a living, breathing force' (2012: 294):

I have always loved bladey grass, the way it whispers and shivers on the faintest breeze, the way it changes colour with the season from green to brown, even its ability to draw blood. There is nothing really remarkable about bladey grass to look at it, clumps of long sharply pointed leaves with razor edges.

Beyond the bladey grass are the carpet grasses which trap the unsuspecting in a tightly interwoven tangle. The carpet grasses come up to dense seed which sticks to anything that passes through it. They quiver in the breeze and change colour with the season, but lack the fascination, the seductive charm of the bladey grass. In the patches not totally consumed by the carpet grasses, fireweed pokes its way to the surface, with its bright yellow, toxic but happy-looking flowers (Chudy 2012: 15).

My second conscious learning about ecocriticism was from Beverley Farmer and involves poetic prose, or what Mark Tredinnick calls the lyric essay (2003), and the prose poem. Farmer lives on the Victorian coast of Australia, on the Great Ocean Road, and has been writing the landscape of Port Lonsdale, one of its major towns, for some time. The southern coast of Victoria is one of many coastal lines in Australia as an island, whose beauty can be grand or subtle, making you stop, directing your gaze, and thence your imagination, holding your heart and producing affect, challenging your intellect to focus a little from the brain's full storehouse of compelling activity. Salty air, sandstone cliffs, scrubby sand dunes, sandy coves, big surf.

In Farmer's essay, 'Mouths of gold' (2005), in her collection *The bone house*, we are in the swim of her place-based quotidian intimacies with the sun burning on a blind, the punted end of a wine bottle like a rock pool, the fire of a blood orange, the dry carapace of a rotting pomegranate, 'jellyfish like ice on the thaw', 'flat water in silver flanges' (29), and more. Here, encounters with 'the ecological and the cultural, the human and the non-human, the local and the global and the real and the imaginary' (Cloke and Owain, qtd. in Iluka 2008) together make a particular place.

Farmer's writing style in 'Mouths of gold' was foreshadowed, over a decade previously, in her 1990 publication, *A body of water* – innovative itself as a hybrid of journal, short stories and poems – when she commented on her desire for a looser form of writing. 'This new writing', she wrote, 'I want it to be ... more open ... and rich, and free of angst' (1990: 3). This moment is memorable for the visibility of a shift in thinking, a longing so desirous of change it is felt viscerally as a physical sensation off the page, a spinning we watch while we wait for the agent to come to rest in a new position. In 'Mouths of gold', referring both to what she is writing and how she is writing, Farmer describes the narrative as:

self-effaced, lapped in folds of itself, as water is, and shadow on water, developing in loops rather than along a story line, and therefore devoid – free – of narrative tension ... To be true to its organic form, any tension there is can only be that between the current of lived time and the reverberating rings of wave made by the stone that has broken through (2005: 4–5).

In this essay, Farmer works with 'the moment itself, stopped' (2005: 12), and rather than narrative flow, there is growth like 'frost or coral crystal by crystal. A marbling of blood on snow, on cloth ... a red nimbus' (72). Her writing is characterised by poetic prose if not very exactly the prose poem, with the following as just one of many possible examples:

The moths are dying off, the brown moths that came flocking out of their caves and clefts in the mountains to the lights of houses, dusty husks beating at lampshades, piling up in corners One has crept on to the page under the lamp, head bowed. A bent amber feeler, a sumptuous ruff, a cockade of fine hairs like the stamens of a dark flower. Her wings are patterned black and brown with a scribble of white paint, and pleating, quilting with a nap of plush, wings like weathered bark. Her shadow on the page is warped as if underwater (2005: 41).

But here is more exactly, I believe, an example of the prose poem, 'Valley', written by Louise Crisp, and demonstrating again that combination of the ecological, cultural, human, non-human, local, global, real and imaginary (Cloke and Owain qtd in Iluka 2008) in place, and self-, making:

A friend says: you grew up in hard country
meaning, you were free to wander. The dry hills
pelting me with loneliness. A black kelpie
followed my horse. We ate from fruit trees
of abandoned houses around the gold diggings.
The valley was in permanent drought. Words were
infrequent as rain. Even the creek stopped flowing.

The dry hill was my home and words were thoughts
 uttered in silence. No one to encounter them
 but the trees, friendly as the pitch black dark.
 How else can I explain myself? (2007: 85)

For me, this prose poem explodes out of its intensity, the history of the narrator, written through events and interconnections with the more-than-human, flowing, rushing towards me through time.

The prose poem is not obvious, large, brash or quick-smart. It is small and subtle and works relatively slowly via resonance. It is a quiet revolutionary of the hybrid, working with phrasing as well as sentences, characterised by the fluid and hypnotic, a clearly conscious use of language, narrative balanced by lyricism, leaps of association, implications of a dramatic context, development by small sequences and accretions (Brophy 2002, Shapcott 2003). Because of its brevity, it can easily be dismissed, abandoned as something of little value. Joanne burns memorably wrote of the prose poem that it 'knows the potential, the freedom of not being too obvious. The prose poem says find me' (1989: 29). So it has proven challenging for me to teach the prose poem in the contemporary Australian tertiary undergraduate creative-writing classroom, because, for my students, the prose poem remains flat and one-dimensional in its brevity, and its meanings hidden in its self-effacement.

Moreover, the prose poem is a hybrid text, a mixture of the prose sentence and the aesthetics of poetry. James Ley said of hybrid texts that they 'place demands on the reader in excess of most forms of entertainment. They require not just reading, but rereading' (2005). The essay, a larger form, can also be challenging to teach, in the same circumstances mentioned above, if its structure is non-linear, associative, as the prose poem's is, proceeding in a seemingly fractured and fragmented way. Like the prose poem in its compression, the essay without a straightforward, linear structure requires a close reading, time to make your way through it, in order to understand what it is offering.

Realism and conventional linear structuring such as a through plot line of beginning, middle and end are immediately and readily understood by undergraduates in the context specified above. Realism is the default position for the majority of readers, because it repeats what we already know – that is, 'social realism tends to conform to wellworn expectations' (Fielder 2006). And although social realism is 'only one type of writing amongst a range of alternatives' (Smith 2005: 28), nevertheless 'much mainstream Australian literature', notes Brian Castro, settles for 'realism and', he additionally notes, 'ordinariness' (2008: 88).

Farmer's writing in 'Mouths of gold' proceeds by association, sometimes through incident, sometimes image, sometimes language. It is set in paragraphic chunks of variable length, sometimes a set of indented paragraphs and sometimes a single sentence, sometimes a quote, a definition, sometimes something seen or thought, sometimes a narrative progression or digression. The central incident in the essay is a family experiencing the shock of the violent death. We move, for example, from the imprint of a bloodied head on a white shirt after a fatal car accident, to the careful, detailed visioning of a white iris which itself is speckled, and which is made of a

calyx or veil, and, next, on to a ritual of death – the closing of the eyes and mouth – as veiling, then on to the underwater caverns of Queenscliff – Port Lonsdale, and back to the sea-like creaturely-ness of the iris (24–8). Moments of incident, observation and commentary are coupled together in Farmer’s writing.

Brenda Walker has described this ‘clustering’ (1996: 7) of incident, observation, and commentary as a strategy of risk. Rosslyn Prosser says of a writing that shifts between events, ideas and perspectives, and uses ‘collage or montage’ and ‘mixed genres’ that it disrupts ‘the cohesion of dominant narrative modes’ and ‘realist representation’ (2005: vii), and that ‘the use of the fragment asks that you remember from word to word, that the accumulation of images and stories allows you to construct and formulate’ (27). Hazel Smith said an experimental approach to writing, which is exemplified in Farmer’s prose here, means retaining an open-ended and open-minded attitude, pursuing new, diverse modes of textual exploration, working beyond and against familiar literary codes and conventions, adopting a subversive and transgressive stance to the literary, and breaking up generic and linguistic norms (2005: ix–x).

Farmer’s ‘Mouths of gold’ essay (2005) and Horridge’s, Chudy’s and Crisp’s poetic prose/poems are performances of the use of metaphor and imagination in an unfolding responsiveness. They record a presence and an approach antithetical to some prevalent modes of existence of multiple inputs and multitasking. There is the sense of embodied engagement, a visceral response with ‘more-than-human beings, things, places and histories’ (Rigby 2006), an enactment of creativity as ‘being open to the other ... in a process of intersubjective world changing and making’ (Wheeler 2006: 133–4).

In Farmer’s essay, the family experience of the violent death is as a profound rift in time. Farmer says of death – the ‘impending fact’ (2005: 15) that lurks ubiquitously, no matter how variably masqueraded, deceptively disguised or surprisingly well-hidden – that ‘we believe in anything rather than accept that a whole world emblazoned inside the eggshell of the skull is fated for extinction’ (5). John Tomlinson has noted that time itself is neither linear-progressive nor cyclic (2007); it has accidents and surprises in store for us and is constituted by profound rifts and forks. These rifts in time make us aware of the contingency of our existence. It is the imagination that admits to the contingency of reality, that takes account of the processural nature of its unfolding (Wheeler 2006: 98). Thence, our daily lives require a constant reflexive re-balancing, an experimental approach, a strategy of improvisation.

Metaphors, says Dick Hebdige, ‘are capable of drawing together diverse, even antagonistic constituencies’ (1993: 272). I want to draw together, through metaphoric comparison, a complex system such as challenging Australian ecologies, survival strategies and Farmer’s writing strategies. Wheeler describes complex systems as ‘highly sensitive to initial conditions’, ‘non-linear and iterative’, ‘recursive’, ‘evolutionary’, ‘dissipative’, ‘auto-poietic’, existing ‘close to the edge of chaos’ and having a pattern of ‘stability followed by episodes of bifurcation’ (2006: 53–4). A reflexive, experimental and improvised survival strategy is deployed by, for example,

the banded stilt, an Australian wading bird, in order to survive in Australian ecologies, which are, on the whole, complex: variable, paradoxical, ephemeral and erratic (Robin 2005: 49). The banded stilt has the ability to accommodate, to be nomadic, ungovernable, adaptive, contingent and opportunistic. Farmer's writing in 'Mouths of gold' resembles the mutable, shifting qualities of complex systems and the canny, adaptive strategies necessary for survival in environments which are in crisis in the early twenty-first century.

Constantly distracted by the mass of human-engineered activity, we have lost our ability, Hamilton says, to be affected by nature; we have lost our ability to be present; we have lost our imagination, and the imagery to inspire an appropriate responsiveness (2005: 191). But we are 'embodied creatures', says Wheeler, for whom 'the natural world ... is the ground-state' (2006: 91). 'An ecologically-informed point of view' (2006: 91), she says, is one 'that sees all life, including culture, as naturally co-evolved and interdependent': this is our 'entangled mutuality' (Rose 2005: 36), the 'incessant ... presencing that questions us into being' (Dewsbury 2009). The language of poetry and literary forms such as the prose poem can do the work of an ecologically informed point of view, an 'incessant presencing' of our 'entangled mutuality', by performing it for us.

Endnote

1. I read Lyn Jacob's book *Against the grain: Beverley Farmer's writing* (2001 UQP) after I wrote this essay over several years, and I discovered that we had come to similar conclusions.

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