

## University of Sydney

## David Brooks

## Plenitude

### Biographical note:

David Brooks has published four collections of poetry (the latest *The Balcony*, UQP 2008), three collections of short fiction, and three novels (most recently *The Umbrella Club*, UQP 2009). He is Associate Professor of Australian Literature at the University of Sydney, where he also directs the graduate program in Creative Writing. He has been co-editor of *Southerly* since 2000. His work has been widely anthologised, translated and short-listed. In 2011 UQP will publish *The Sons of Clovis*, his extensive revision of the accepted story of the Ern Malley hoax.

### Keywords:

Plenitude – pigeon – passenger – slaughter – cull

Plenitude<sup>i</sup>

*for Johanna Featherstone*

It is the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2008, and I am thinking of pigeons  
 partly because Johanna has asked me, and partly because  
 I have just seen three  
 top-knot pigeons  
 on separate telephone wires  
 at a cross-street by the  
 highway in Lawson, NSW,  
 and thought, of course, of Ezra Pound A?  
 seeing the swallows  
 on the wires of the DTC<sup>ii</sup>  
 and (he not I) thinking (was it?) of Janequin<sup>iii</sup> – how what  
 limited that stave must have been, with half the half-  
 notes limitless sky (what  
 sound F,  
           does a What  
                   swallow flight?  
                           make in

although all  
 I can think of for  
 now is how I  
 ate a pigeon once, at Gay Bilson's O  
 so ridiculously expensive  
 restaurant at Berowra, the  
 cool and  
 grey-pink  
 tenderness of the  
 breast of it, so almost uncooked – so  
*rare* – that I very nearly complained  
 and would certainly not have finished it  
 were it not for *the price I was paying*, and my own reputation  
 (though with no-one but myself) for eating almost everything – snake,  
 alligator, snail, goat, Li-river catfish, sea-squirt, kangaroo –  
 as if, as I thought then, that  
 were something to be proud of  
 and not yet another of the  
 Stupidities.

Why  
 pigeons? I wonder,  
 and then Why  
 not? if the tiny  
 and not the immense shall  
 lead us (that is Webb<sup>iv</sup>)  
 out of the wilderness of our human thought, then

there can be no  
stopping-point (follow  
a cockroach, say  
into the  
labyrinth of desire...)

The great  
ornithologist, John James Audobon<sup>v</sup>,  
recorded having seen, in the  
autumn of 1813,  
a passage of migrating  
Passenger Pigeons  
lasting three days, so many sometimes they  
filled the sky and almost  
blotted out the sun. In a similar  
index of plenitude, W.  
G. Sebald, in the third  
chapter of *The Rings of Saturn*<sup>vi</sup>  
reproduces a photograph  
of men standing up to their knees  
in a tide of fresh-caught herring (I  
remember that, in my  
small way – the mullet-run in  
Huskisson...)<sup>vii</sup>

Passenger, from *passager*, to  
pass (they  
carried nothing): rose-  
pink (the male), grey-  
crested, long tail...

glass-  
eyed, faded by  
sun from the  
window,  
layered with  
dust

the last  
Passenger Pigeon, named Martha,  
died "alone" at the  
Cincinnati Zoo at around  
1.00pm on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1914, and the  
herring industry is gone.  
I think of them because just  
lately the Commonwealth Government of Australia  
condoned the slaughter  
of four hundred kangaroos  
in the heart of the National Capital – not  
many, but I take it as sign<sup>viii</sup> – and now

there is talk of a "cull"  
of koalas on Kangaroo Island, another  
of parrots in Gippsland, possums  
in north-western Victoria, and just today (4<sup>th</sup> July, 2008) I  
read that the last  
Tasmanian Devil in the wild will  
very likely die before  
face-cancer-free replacements are ready  
to be released from the laboratory

the last  
Tasmanian Tiger "in captivity" died  
at the Hobart Zoo  
on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1936; the last  
Tasmanian Aboriginal... ah,  
but we are not to  
draw such comparisons...

I try  
to work out the essential  
difference between  
humanity and the  
Ebola virus but can't come  
up with much, the huge  
ulcers of our cities  
creeping over the earth  
devouring everything in their path, but to  
return to pigeons, as I  
suppose I must, fearing that  
any attention drawn to them is like  
*directing the sight of a gun*,  
I'd like to salute  
Bohumil Hrabal, author of  
*Closely Watched Trains<sup>ix</sup>*,  
who is said to have  
died while  
trying to feed pigeons  
through a fifth-floor window  
of a Czechoslovakian hospital:

privately, I think it was a  
bold and  
arguably suc-  
cessful attempt at  
flight

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A poem which owes nothing directly to "A Letter to People About Pelicans" (Michael Dransfield) or "Lament for Passenger Pigeons" (Judith Wright), but which is nonetheless conscious of them as fellow travellers. I could not – my fly-away line in mind – make quite the same disclaimer for "parts toward a meaning" (J.S. Harry).

<sup>2</sup> As he relates at the end of Canto LXXXII: "three solemn half notes / their white downy chests black-rimmed / on the middle wire". The "DTC" is the American Detention Training Centre in which Pound was held – initially in a wire (bird?) cage – in 1945 awaiting extradition to the United States to face charges of treason.

<sup>3</sup> In – as – Canto LXXV, Pound reproduces a 1935 arrangement by Gerhart Munch (1907-1988) of *Le Chant des Oiseaux* by Clement Janequin (c.1483-1558).

<sup>4</sup> Francis Webb, "Five Days Old"

<sup>5</sup> See his *Birds of America*, 2nd ed. (London, 1827-38). An on-line version is available ([http://www.audubon.org/bird/BoA/BOA\\_index.html](http://www.audubon.org/bird/BoA/BOA_index.html)).

<sup>6</sup> (New York: New Directions, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> For an interesting poetic treatment of the same phenomenon, see Robert Adamson's "The Mullet Run", *Cross the Border* (Sydney: Prism, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> They slaughtered another 6000 a year later, at Majura, a few kilometres away. The official "harvest" of kangaroos Australia-wide for 2009 was 3,985,531.

<sup>9</sup> Bohumil Hrabal (1914-1997). His *Ostre sledovane vlaky* (1965) was first published in English as *Close Watch on the Trains* (London: Cape Editirons) in 1968, and in 1971 was made into the film, *Closely Watched Trains*, by Jiri Menzel.

## Research statement

I have argued elsewhere (Brooks 2009) that an ethical adjustment re the species barrier is a dire necessity that requires a radical decentring of the human and realignment of all human systems of thought. My own areas—literature, writing of fiction and poetry, poetics—are no exception. Acts of criticism (e.g. Brooks 2010), theory and poetry alike must test this barrier and seek this realignment at every level of their assumptions and practice. I.E. it must happen in my poetry as in my criticism. But it must also be a balancing-act: advocacy and the didactic are as important as experiment. The reader must be kept, not left behind. The challenge in "Plenitude" is to fly (!) in the face of most readers, for whom the species barrier is probably no issue, yet at the same time seek to calm or charm with anecdote, image, music, surprise (formal *and* semantic): to supply the information *of* the poem as well as information *behind* it (footnotes; the poem [also] as essay), and to *locate* the poem in a tradition/field of related endeavour (footnotes [again], internal reference, bearing in mind Pound's dictum that actual composition is the highest form of criticism [Pound 1934]). As to research, *poetry is always its own research*. It has taken nearly forty years of trial and error—*continual experiment*—to be able to do some of the things I have done in this poem, mostly to keep them so barely visible that (hopefully) most readers won't consciously register them.

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