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
It is the 4th 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 seeing the swallows on the wires of the DTC and (he not I) thinking (was it?) of Janequin – how limited that stave must have been, with half the half-notes limitless sky (what sound does a swallow make in F, What flight?) 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) 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\textsuperscript{v},
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 \textit{The Rings of Saturn}\textsuperscript{vi}
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...).\textsuperscript{vii}

Passenger, from \textit{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\textsuperscript{st}, 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\textsuperscript{viii} – 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 (4th 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 7th, 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 Trainsix,
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**

1. 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).

2. 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.


4. Francis Webb, "Five Days Old"


8. 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.

9. Bohumil Hrabal (1914-1997). His Oste 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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