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The Purposes of Landscape Poetry: Ecology or Psychology?

by Andrew Taylor

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Introduction

From the earliest days of European settlement, in the late eighteenth century, the Australian landscape has been problematic. After all, the seasons are back to front, the swans are antipodially black, not white, one bird laughs instead of sings, many animals hop rather than run, and trees shed their bark but not their leaves. Also the land itself can be harsh and unaccommodating, dominated by that unholy trinity of fire, flood and drought. Not only for the early settlers from Europe did it present difficulties for farming and food production, which produced a portrait of Australian nature as antagonistic and malign. Even today, due to misguided and unsustainable water management and farming practices, resulting in the dual problems of acute water shortages and rising salinity levels, much of the continent is facing imminent ecological crisis.

It is not surprising, then, that landscape poetry (and landscape painting) should be significant in Australia, as a way of creating and articulating a meaningful relationship with the natural world. In this context, it is important to remember that landscape, as the geographer Dennis Cosgrove puts it, 'is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world' (Cosgrove 13). Or as he also wrote, 'Landscape is a way of seeing the world' (Cosgrove 12). With this in mind, one must acknowledge that there was, of course, a profound poetry of the Australian landscape long before the Europeans arrived. However, with the exception of the group of writers who called themselves Jindyworobaks in the nineteen thirties to the nineteen fifties, the great songs of the indigenous people made little impact on non-indigenous writers until Les Murray's cycle, 'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle' appeared in the volume *Ethnic Radio* in 1977. Rather, early settlers looked to the countries of their homeland for poetic models: the ballads of Scotland and Ireland and, at a more literary level, English poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. For landscape poetry there was James Thomson's *The Seasons*, for example, early in the eighteenth century, and those slightly later meditations on rural neglect and decay such as Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village'. Closer in time to the early Australian colonies was William Wordsworth, and in particular Wordsworth's great poems such as 'Tintern Abbey' (1798), and 'The Prelude', posthumously published in 1850. Of course there was also Keats' 'Ode to Autumn' (1820). But when landscape poetry began to be written in Australia, the Romantic Movement in England was truly over.

The contrast is with the United States, where Romanticism found fertile ground among such writers as Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Hawthorne. In the absence of their sense of the interanimation of the human and the natural worlds, which was the animating spirit of Romantic and post-Romantic landscape poetry, one might want to ask: 'What then, in Australia, is the motivation for landscape poetry?'

If we accept that 'Landscape is a way of seeing the world', then landscape poetry is that which articulates and defines that way of seeing. It translates our awareness of how we relate to the rest of the world into a shared language. Significantly, in recent times we have seen the growing awareness that there is not a human world and a natural world. There is only one world, and if it lacks the spiritual dimension hinted at by Wordsworth it is none the less of supreme value, and it is vital that we understand our place in it. But in translating into language a way of seeing the world, and our relationship within it, in its widest sense, landscape poetry can also be put to a diversity of purposes, it can serve a number of different ends. Consequently, my aim in the remainder of this essay is to look at the landscape poetry of three contemporary Australians in order to find out what - in a time and in a country of growing ecological awareness - motivates their poetry, and what purpose, or purposes, it serves.

Philip Hodgins

Philip Hodgins was born in 1959 and died of leukemia at the age of thirty six. Much of his poetry deals graphically, even confrontationally, with his illness, something he endured for more than ten years. But probably the bulk of his poetry concerns rural life and covers such aspects of it as 'Making Hay' (New, 16), 'A Difficult Calf' (23), 'A Farm in the High Country' (65), 'Leeches' (58), 'Dirt Roads' (72), 'After the Shearing' (130), 'Pregnant Cow' (87), 'Milk' (88), 'The Bull' (89), 'Standard Hay Bales' (92), 'The Cattle Show' (98), 'Superphosphate' (112), 'The Rabbit Trap' (144), 'Three Pig Diseases' (150), 'At the Sheep-parasite Field Day' (55) - these are the titles of just a few relevant poems in his *New Selected Poems* (2000) to which all Hodgins' page numbers refer.

Obvious from this is that Hodgins' 'way of seeing the world' is at the very least positioned from the point of view of someone living and working within what we may call the rural industry, i.e. someone actually engaged in the day to day activities of farming. A number of his earlier poems are memories of his childhood on a farm. But later poems, especially from the volumes *Animal Warmth* (1990) and *Up On All Fours* (1993) clearly grow from his adult experiences of rural life, despite his ongoing illness.

The American critic Paul Kane perceptively considers Hodgins' poetry to be moving towards 'a new mode... that allows for a genuine didactic impulse that swerves away from the self-centred lyric' (Kane 280). (He identifies the 'self-centred lyric' with

Romanticism). Of central relevance here is the long poem 'Second Thoughts on The Georgics' (New, 100). This is a ten-page, genially pessimistic account of the difficulties of modern-day farming in Australia which reflects ironically on Virgil's *Georgics*, the Latin poet's four part treatise on Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Beekeeping first published in 29 BC. Here is just a brief sample. Talking of breaking a horse, Hodgins concludes, 'You can be in the saddle within a day / but the full education takes years'. Then he continues:

Same with dogs. It's frustrating really
 the way they reach their peak
 just when they're disappearing over the hill.
 That's why it's important always to have
 a young dog coming on. Make sure
 they're well-bred – a champion doesn't cost
 any more to feed than a mongrel
 and it's the same for the vet or anything. (107)

As befits the Georgic, the tone is relaxed, colloquial, conversationally instructional, with a touch of humour to enliven the pessimism – for example the image of the dogs 'disappearing over the hill' signifying in this instance that the dogs are getting too old to work. Concluding that 'no matter what type of farming you do /...the only thing you can be sure of / is that you'll never get a fair return...', the poem ends with its only explicit reference to Virgil apart from the title itself:

If Virgil was here I reckon he'd agree.
 Even keeping bees is a waste of time –
 better to take your honey where you find it. (109)

(The last line is a humorous variant on the cliché, 'better to take your money where you find it').

The tone of the second poem I wish to look at is very different. 'The Land Itself' begins in this way:

Beyond all arguments there is the land itself,
 drying out and cracking at the end of summer
 like a vast badly-made ceramic, uneven and powdery,
 losing its topsoil and its insect-bodied grass seeds
 to the wind's dusty perfumes, that sense of the land,
 then soaking up soil-darkening rains and filling out
 with the force of renewal at the savoured winter break. (189)

One appreciates the power of those last two lines even more, I suggest, with its capture of 'the force of renewal' after a seemingly hopeless desiccation and collapse of 'the land itself', when one realises that Hodgins also wrote, in an earlier book:

It's happened as they said it would.
While I was shoring up my hopes
and making plans to go abroad
remission has discreetly stopped...

The words for death are all too clear.
I write the poem dumb with fear. (40)

And in a later poem called 'Cytotoxic Rigor':

The drugs they've added to tone down the shock
are as useless as the words from a prayer book. (221)

In the light of such a bleak confrontation of the horrors of cancer and its attempted treatment, any celebration of renewal could well appear as little more than wishful thinking. And in fact 'The Land Itself' continues, not primarily as a celebration of renewal so much as a hard-headed exploration of the various ways the land has been subjected to human uses: sheep and cattle grazing, 'emu farms and kangaroo farms' established as 'tax write-offs', and, further out still, mineral exploration and mining where a female 'field geologist sits in an air-conditioned caravan', slightly puzzled by the relationship of the 'computer screen of numbers' in front of her and 'the land itself' visible through her 'dust-filtered window'.

This sense that people and land are engaged in a relationship that is simultaneously physical, existential and commercial appears in most of Hodgins' landscape poetry, perhaps most explicitly realised in the poem 'Erosion and Salinity'. Here are the first two stanzas:

What used to be a paddock
is now a kind of chart.
A deep erosion-split
runs through the middle
crooked as if the page
were being torn apart,

erratically up and down
as if that jagged line
were some financial graph
tracing the water table's
salt-productive rise
and the farmer's dry decline. (149)

With its clear-sighted realism, Hodgins' landscape poetry is determinedly non-Pastoral. The question to ask then, is just how do we characterise it? Before attempting to do that, I will turn now to several poems by Les Murray.

Les Murray

Born in 1938, Murray is perhaps the best known Australian poet today, sometimes mentioned as a possible Nobel Laureate. His preference for what he calls Boeotian (or rural and spiritual) over Athenian (or urban and intellectual) values is well known, and sits neatly with his religious beliefs. It is explicit in the essay 'On Sitting Back and Thinking about Porter's Boeotia' in his essay collection *A Working Forest* (121), which was published in 1997 and dedicated 'To the greater glory of God'.

'The Idyll-Wheel: Cycle of a Year in Bunyah, New South Wales, April 1986-April 1987', to give it its full title, grew from a number of poems originally published in *The Daylight Moon*. This twenty one page cycle, comprising a Preface and thirteen poems centring on each month of the year (April gets two, one for each year), traces the effects wrought on a single patch of countryside and its inhabitants by the changing seasons. But unlike Hodgins' 'The Land Itself', Murray's 'Idyll Wheel' is triumphantly cyclic: 'And so we've come right round the sun / to April again. It's unique again / like each month, each year' the last poem begins, and it goes on to celebrate how 'old fruit trees declare themselves russet / along the creeks' and farm life goes on 'by touches, / a stump burning, dam scoopings, new wire stitches / and unstated idylls had driving to and from' (*Collected* 1994, 305). (An earlier version of the poem ends 'The idyll wheel is the working wheel' (*Collected* 1991, 267). 'Idyll' in this context, with its echo of Theocritus, would seem to signify a brief poetic insight into something rural, and the poem is thus celebrating those moments of insight and revelation afforded by rural life and its cyclic nature.

The landscape of 'The Idyll Wheel' is a peopled and working landscape like Hodgins' – Robert Dixon calls it a 'cultural landscape' (*Dixon*, 302), but it also has a dimension that Hodgins resolutely refuses to acknowledge. Reviewing a book by Eric Rolls, Murray praises it for its abolition of perspective, enabling 'a sort of enlarged physical present in which no life is suppressed' (*Working* 160). Or as he says in a charming poem about visiting a farm where no-one was at home to greet him except a polite dog, 'we saw / that out there on that bare, crusted country / background and foreground had merged; / nothing that existed there was background' (*Collected* 1994, 339) since everything has value. Significantly the poem is called 'The Assimilation of Background'. 'Assimilation' does not mean abolition here, but the bringing of it into prominence and value equal to that of what was previously in the foreground. As Robert Dixon argues, Murray's poems 'treat landscape and the practice of everyday life as revelations of the sacred' (*Dixon*, 286).

This holistic landscape is a far cry from the traditional Pastoral genre, which was essentially an urban phenomenon. It is superficially akin to the perspectiveless visual art that prevailed in Europe from the decline of Classical Rome until the end of the Middle Ages, to which Murray alludes in his essay on Eric Rolls (1997, 160). But I would argue it is also close to the landscape described by Lucien Levy-Bruhl as one which 'did not localise sacredness in the earth as such, but jumbled together as a whole all the hierophanies in nature as it lay around' (translated Eliade, quoted

Fitter 26). In his fascinating study of landscape poetry from remote times to the eighteenth century, *Poetry, Space, Landscape, Toward a New Theory*, Chris Fitter sees this state as characteristic of a pre-territorial and hence pre-agricultural culture (Fitter, 25-27). And in fact Murray's earlier poem, 'Walking to the Cattle Place' (*Collected* 1994, 55-77), explicitly harks back to those remote moments in human history 'beyond roads or the stave-plough' (*Collected* 1994, 58) - i.e. before agriculture - whose sense of the mythically sacred is invoked in Murray's poem by his frequent use of Sanskrit (*Collected* 1994, 55). Affinities with traditional Aboriginal culture are obvious.

This mythic or religious dimension is totally absent from Hodgins' landscape, which would be categorised by Fitter as 'quotidian', by which he means a landscape and a landscape art 'which favours routine activity and typical experience over images of the mythical, remote and awesome' (Fitter 35) and displays 'a relish for the routine and actual' (Fitter 36). Murray imbues landscape with a religious dimension which, at a venture, served as a counter to his widely-acknowledged long battle with depression. In contrast, Hodgins, under a decade-long sentence of death by leukaemia, created a body of poetry which focused minutely and unflinchingly on 'the routine and the actual' of both rural and bodily - inescapably bodily - life. It is a poetry of stubborn realism, the opposite of that denial of reality that can be so tempting for those suffering from a long and fatal illness. In the words of Wallace Stevens' poem 'The Snow Man', Hodgins' poetry is determined to acknowledge 'Nothing that is not there, and the nothing that it' (Stevens 11).

John Kinsella

For the remainder of this essay I will turn to the poetry of John Kinsella. Born in 1963, Kinsella, like Murray, also has a wide international reputation. Three volumes among his large output are of particular relevance here. They are *The Silo* (1995/1997), *The Hunt* (1998), and the more recently published *The New Arcadia* (2005) whose title clearly refers us back to Sir Philip Sidney. All three books are firmly, though not exclusively, located in the vast agricultural area known as the Wheatbelt to the east of Perth in Western Australia. Taken together, they form a verbal three movement symphony, with the middle volume, *The Hunt*, being a kind an extended exemplification of what Kinsella himself has called anti-pastoral (Terry Gifford's term in his study of the modern British Pastoral, *Green Voices*) or poison pastoral.

Brian Henry, in his essay 'The Pastoral Down Under', rightly claims that *The Hunt* presents 'Kinsella's anti-pastoral in its fiercest form' (Henry 195). The title poem, for example, tells how the protagonist as a boy, and his cousin, hunt down and kill a large feral cat that has been marauding the farms. But despite their success they are now too guilty or ashamed to confess, because 'a bitter / cold had struck our bones, fire bringing no relief' (*Hunt*, 32). Other poems deal with such things as a truck wreck ('Jackknife', *Hunt*, 46), the danger inherent in falling into a wheat silo

(‘Drowning in Wheat’, *Hunt*, 14), a man crushed to death by his tractor (‘The Rearing Tractor’, 1998, 80), slaughtering emus (‘Emu Hunt’, *Hunt*, 21), the death of children (‘The Disappearing’, *Hunt*, 24 and ‘Death of an Infant’, *Hunt*, 33), and the attempted hanging of a man by a drunken mob (‘A Lynching under the Southern Cross’, *Hunt*, 29).

These poems articulate affront and anger at the way nature has been despoiled by bad farming practices that have caused devastating salinity, by lack of respect for the natural world, by aerial spraying of poisons, and also, and very importantly, by the dispossession of the indigenous inhabitants by colonial settlers. In addition, country life is seen as frequently brutalising those who live there. These themes run through all three books, as they do also in more recent books, *Shades of the Sublime and Beautiful*, and *Divine Comedy*. But they appear in *The Hunt* in their most concentrated form.

The first book of the trilogy, *The Silo*, with its five movements and Beethovenian echoes, is more varied. It is lightened, for example, by an awareness that generations of dwelling in a place can indeed lead to what the critic Lawrence Buell, in *Writing for an Endangered World*, has called ‘environmental connectedness’ (Buell 17) or ‘place-connectedness’ (Buell 28):

family
 ashes
 are the size
 that will hold
 soul, stars and soil
 in place. (1987, 35)

But it is in the third, and by far the largest, of the three books, *The New Arcadia*, that a significant shift can be observed in Kinsella’s involvement with pastoral – and with the natural and rural world. What we have here is a reconfiguration of his landscape.

The book is divided into five sections called Acts, plus an ‘Envoy’. Each Act begins with a lengthy poem called ‘Reflectors’, road poems set on the two hour drive from Perth to the Western Australian town of York, near where the poet is currently living. They are complex, meditative, associative, free wheeling and, of course, reflective poems, but significantly they are poems of movement, mostly movement from the city into the country, from the urban present to the landscape of the poet’s youth and present home. But instead of being a denial of the urban, they link the two. They construct a landscape comprising both urban and rural, each with its faults, but also each with its virtues. They are poems of connectedness. While this is not in itself unprecedented, it becomes significant when linked with my next point.

Other poems display a sharply fractured syntax and, in doing so articulate a fracturing of landscape, of Kinsella's way of seeing the world. Here is an example, the beginning of a poem called 'Swallow':

Delta arrows, transmission
call-ups, ID rapid, sharp, revolutionary
prompting, outer through inner
exposition in the English novel,
as if wildcard, chemical excitability,
stray configuration that's never random [...] (*Arcadia*, 60)

This language is not a traditional concatenation of metaphors but, indeed, is a 'stray configuration that's never random'. The smoothness of apprehension is broken into elements of discrete, often discordant, fragments which, as in the early Cubist paintings of Picasso or Braque, none the less have a challenging coherence.

In these and related poems there is no clear distinction between the natural and the human world – each relies on, and is complicit in the other. Their mutual health is indivisible, and harm done to one causes harm to the other. Perception and what is perceived, articulation and what is articulated, ideally should speak a common language. All too frequently, however, these two syntaxes get out of sync, and the resulting ecological and psychological discord and distress are manifest and at times explicit as linguistic disruption and fracture, as in the final lines of 'Twenty-eight parrot double sonnet, hymn and elegy':

they rouse the farmer's gun
and the malicious ones who poison
wheat and watch as the flock
chokes on tongues, sun
half out of their eyes, the sum
of their colour running into cracks
opened in sky and syntax. (*Arcadia*, 66)

On the other hand, when the two syntaxes are attuned to each other, connected in harmony, the result can be cautiously optimistic, as is the ending of "Borrow Pit":

I borrow words
from before I could speak, the tones of wandoo and mallee,
intricacies of roots, and palettes of gravel
that stare us in the face, trunks horizontal, parallel
to the rippling undersurface, those winning ways. (*Arcadia*, 142)

And even more explicitly, in his most recent book to date, *Divine Comedy*, Kinsella writes

And I love the birds that nest,

or fly in and pass by, trees

that have persisted through clearing
and subdividing, the feral fox
that hides out beneath rolls

of fencing wire. None are symbols.
They are language. Elemental. (*Divine*, 225)

This poetry testifies to a relation to nature, to a landscape, in which nature and subject are interdependent, not only in the ecological sense, which is of paramount importance to Kinsella, but also in their structuration. Keenly attuned to the utterances of the world of which he is a part, what Kinsella hears in nature is a language syntactically close to his own, maybe identical, though all too infrequently in harmony with it. The resultant poetry is a collaborative construction of human and natural, a sometimes discordant and sometimes rhapsodic landscape of intermingling voices and syntax. Such a landscape poetry has grown from a deeper ecological engagement than we find in either Hodgins or Murray, whose main interests lie elsewhere and whose poetry serves different, and differing, though equally valid, purposes.

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