

Coolabah, No.16, 2015, ISSN 1988-5946, *Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians / Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona*

## *Negotiating 'Negative Capability': The Role of Place in Writing*

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**Abstract:** Taking its lead from the poet John Keats' notion of 'negative capability' (1891, p. 48), this paper explores the methodology of representing landscapes in writing, specifically using place to effect the process of '...being capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubt, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...' (ibid). Keats refers to the poet as 'taking part' in the life of the poem (1891, p. 48). Being *in* the poem this way attempts to allow the reader to experience the emotion of the poem. Mary Oliver extrapolated this by referring to 'the "mere" diction of the poem [being] the vehicle that holds then transfers from the page to the reader an absolutely essential quality of real feeling' (1994, p 84).

This paper focuses on the work of two Australian writers whose work captures in verse a sense of connection to rugged and remote terrains. To evoke this sense of connection, Keats' negative capability comes into play. This moment is described here as a metaphysical space where a meditative state provides the writer with moments described in this paper as a 'glimpse'. The 'glimpse' is a recognition of that moment of connection, without which 'poetry cannot happen' (Oliver, 1994 p. 84). For our purposes here, we read this as being about the connection to a place as written on the page and how that then broadens out upon reading to become a connection to something *beyond* the notion of specific place. Keats own words speak to this possibility, of allowing uncertainty to provide a sense of meaning and connection.

This paper demonstrates, via creative practice and the work of like-minded Australian poets, the internal and external processes that take place to facilitate the 'glimpse' and inform our own writing about landscapes. This writing is individually informed by knowledge about environment and notions of poetic space, where 'aspects of the unconscious move into consciousness' (Hetherington, 2012 p. 8). The authors will explore the commonalities and distinctions between their work, using brief examples.

**Keywords:** Landscape, poetry, glimpse

## **Introduction**

The role of place in writing, and specifically how place is both evoked and echoed in words providing a reader with insight to location and landscape is the focus of this paper. The moment of evocation and echo is described here as the 'glimpse'. This will be demonstrated by way of discussion, and examples from Australian poetry to provide the reader with an evocation of this 'glimpse'. The discussion also explores notions of creativity that connect our individual creative practice, and how it attempts to capture moments of creativity.

The writing is situated in the Australian landscape, a place we describe as 'edge country', but the ideas here might be applied to works in other languages and contexts with the purpose of affecting a similar evocative response. The experience of the 'glimpse' could be seen to transcend language and culture, allowing for a unique insight into how place effects and informs writing and reading of poetry.

This paper will provide some background to our work, beginning with situating the landscape that inspires it and us. Through the discussion of our place/s, a sense of commonality and distinction can be established about our respective sense of place.

### **The Sub-Tropics (Lynda)**

My work is located in Central Queensland, Australia, in a region known as Capricornia – so named for its position on the Tropic of Capricorn. Yeppoon is a town of some 20,000 people, eight hours drive north of the nearest capital city Brisbane. It is perched on the edge of the Pacific in Keppel Bay, the location of the Keppel Islands group, including the abandoned resort on Great Keppel Is. and over one hundred other uninhabited small islands dotted along the Great Barrier Reef. Within this town is the community of Cooee Bay, where Matthew Flinders passed by in 1804 and a ship was dashed onto rocks in 1848 at a place now called Wreck Point. The place is the traditional home to the Woppaburra people, on the islands, and the Darumbal on the land, where important sites like Gawula (Mt Wheeler) are recognized as sacred, but unfortunately also the location of great injustices, with forced removal of island dwellers from Kanomi (North Keppel Island) and barbaric treatment of Indigenous people around Gawula (Mt Wheeler). The Capricornia region is a place of harsh contrasts, both beautiful and brutal in equal measure.

Initially the seemingly limitless space and black darkness at night in Central Queensland intimidated me in a way the freeways and crowds of the city of my birth never had. The landscape of Central Queensland seems dry and unforgiving, but the sub-tropics on the coast are teeming with wildlife and rich with pockets of rainforest, broken only by dry sweltering scrub to the West and the iridescent Pacific Ocean to the

East. Sitting in the middle of these two extremes provided an interesting contrast, one highlighted by the sometimes formidable weather: crushing humidity and the real threat of cyclones, floods and storm surges.

Life in Capricornia is a negotiation between the expectations of human habitation and the realities of the landscape and ecology of the place. My writing in Capricornia is all about the unstructured and unrestrained, and the inherent beauty of being in a place that consumes you in its vastness. The steel and concrete buildings, black streets and endless cars of the city are replaced with an entirely different population of subtropical plants and animals, and with the brilliant sky and sea. My reaction to this place and the negotiation of my relationship with it, as well as the longing for this place being as a site of *querencia* (a feeling like home) is the focus of my work.

### **The Centre (Leni):**

The focus of my writing is based in Central Australia, where I have lived and worked for 27 years. Over these years I have travelled widely throughout the region for my work and visiting friends who live in remote parts of Central Australia. Alice Springs is the main town in the area with a population of around 30,000 people; it is located at the southern end of the Northern Territory, more than 1600km to the nearest beach in any direction.

The desert becomes part of you if you live in it long enough. This is what has happened to me. The desert has become the focus of my thoughts and thus my writing, a landscape that is so familiar to me it is just *known*. A journey along a certain bush road is important because of all the past journeys I have taken, as well as the current one. The landscape is recognisable and even with dramatic changes to the vegetation over many years, it is familiar, and as I travel through it, it is anticipated. A turn in the road, the spine of a mountain range, the rust colour at sunset, all *known*, like they are extensions of me and not me at the same time.

Alice Springs is set in the desert country of the Arrente people, called Mparntwe in the Arrente language. Rivers only flow after rain. The stunning country is a physical representation of ancient dreaming stories. The country itself tells the story of creations and shows the journeys taken by creation beings as they travelled across the land making water holes, mountain ranges and rock formations (Turner & McDonald 2010; Wallace 2009; Rubuntja & Green 2002; Brookes 1991).

Many local Aboriginal language speakers speak their mother tongue and an array of languages that surround them depending on where family movements take them and into which language group they marry. Most of my Aboriginal students were fluent in four Aboriginal languages and could 'hear' another three or four.

My writing has its basis in the experiences and knowledge of this country, expressed in an understanding of the landscape and the people who inhabit it. Recurrent in my writing are the themes of loss, isolation and transformation explored through place and history of place. This with knowledge is built on over many years through an experience of place drawn from living and working with traditional owners. In my PhD project I am investigating these themes through history by exploring the life of an historical figure. Bertha Strehlow lived in Central Australia in the 1930s, and travelled by camel through the desert with her husband and three Aboriginal camel handlers. She is thought to be the first white woman to see Uluru and Kata Tjuta. Using the device of the verse novel, I explore her growing sense of understanding of the landscape as she travels through it in the winter of 1936 and comes perilously close to death on the journey.

I am interested in the contrasts I find in the experiences of the first white settlers to Central Australia, their sense of wonderment at the landscape and the people, and the stories of the traditional owners, which explain that wonderment in very practical terms of the storied landscape (San Roque & Santospirito 2013). Through my poetry I explore the multiple layers of history of place.

## **Capturing place and belonging**

This paper examines how our work corresponds to our respective sense of place and belonging, and capturing that for the reader. We are attempting to explore and define our understanding of the glimpse; that moment of knowing and becoming.

Australian poet and academic Martin Harrison, in his analysis of this process, says:

The eye and voice, which can invent such vision [in poetry] and invent it out of such a momentarily remembered fragment can only come from a poet operating on the boundary of known and unknown areas of awareness (2007 p. 59).

For us, writing poetry is a distillation process. Knowledge, experience and memory work together to produce a tone or thought for the poetry to work. Poet and academic Jay Parini (2008) writes that to be a poet is to be mindful of the nature of the art 'especially in terms of language [working ] as a kind of echo-chamber in which the origins of words enhance their...denotations and connotations' (pp. x-xi). Understanding the gulf between 'mental images and real images, between spirit and nature' (p. x), allows the poetry to have its own 'inner logic, an inner necessity of its own' (Pretty 2001, p. 3).

Les Murray (2006) writes of the experience of writing about place from memory, 'it was so when we were there' he says with confidence, an idea reiterated by Harrison in his discussion on Australian poetry; 'it will derive from what is captured in the self

reflective, closely felt and technologically aware engagement... to place and environment' (2007 p. 55). A strong sense of place informs our work. The poems grow through knowledge and memory. Academic Tom Lee talks about poetry as 'the most direct way to account for the complexity of perceptual experiences' the sensory moments are 'read' through our skin (2013), thus the poet can express what takes place in a moment.

### **'Negative capability'**

John Keats first posited the idea of being capable and open to the uncertainties of doubt in relation to the process of creativity. He called this 'negative capability' in a letter to his brothers after a heated discussion with a friend (Keats 1891 pp. 46-48). It may be seen that Keats is referring to a kind of higher order experience than that of consciousness, something almost divine. This echoes the discussion of the origins of creativity by celebrated author Elizabeth Gilbert (TED, 2010). Keats referred to Coleridge's experience of being able to let go of what he might call 'fact and reason' by resorting to a sense of beauty which substituted for explanation of experience. We take our lead from these concepts for the purposes of this paper and in relation to our work, extrapolating them to describe that place where the poet is putting themselves willingly into a space and place (both within and without) of doubt. It is an attempt to be in the moment, to be present and in a place of trust. This is a place of risk and for us it facilitates the act and practice of creativity.

The negative element of this process of course is that it may not be an entirely comfortable one. The poet may not feel at ease with the process, with what they are seeing, going through and feeling. Australian poet and academic Kevin Brophy discusses an acceptance of the moment, saying of this experience; 'Perhaps it is enough that the piece of writing disturbs the surface of our lives for a moment' (2003 p. 222). This period of discomfort is described by Dominique Hecq as a 'disturbance' (2012). Hecq describes walking around as she writes a poem, and being physically in the moment, but that moment being one of agitation, a feeling of imbalance. This walking around allows the process of creativity to be enacted. The lines come to her and she is able to let the poem arrive, the act of walking providing a rhythm for the line to rest in.

Being the recipient of words that arrive in a moment predicated to being accepting of imbalance, echoes Elizabeth Gilbert's description of the muse and the arrival of creative ideas (2010) and the sometimes active role the writer must play in being receptive to moments of doubt and imbalance.

### **Taking part in the life of the poem**

We call this sense of being receptive 'taking part in the life of the poem', that is, taking an active role in its creation. In relation to Keats, this means being receptive to being in the moment, of existing in the poem and giving yourself up to it. This knowledge is informed by location, and influenced by the space and sense of belonging. Les Murray in the writing of his poetry has been described as 'watching with his mouth', taking his poem *Three Interiors* as an example: 'The books themselves, that vertical live leather brickwork/...have all turned their backs/ on the casual tourists and, clasped in mediation, they pray/in coined Greek...' he 'courts the senses, pointing as it does to sight, sound and touch' (Steele 2002 p. 177). Knowing the place intimately provides the poet with the opportunity to write *into* the moment. Harrison calls this use of memory to enrich the writing 'a sense of late light brought momentarily into consciousness' (2007 p. 59).

By inhabiting the space of the poem and the landscape it is set in, there is a sense of being in it, which then opens up possibilities for revisiting this sense when reading and responding to the work. In effect, this sense of inhabiting the space of the poem can happen in the landscape it reflects, and can be evoked later at a distance from the landscape for the reader.

Feelings of imbalance and uncertainty are transferred to the reader, and a symbiotic connection is formed. It is a response to the particular physical space and place of the poem itself. The reader experiences a clear and essential vision of the poem rather than being conscious of *how* the poet arrived at that moment. Thus they experience the distillation of what is at the very essence of the poem and the senses in the poem as if they themselves were in that place. Much as the experience of the poet themselves, the reader then experiences this sense of not knowing, a disturbance imbued in not knowing what's going to come by being in the place, and exposing oneself to this possibility. This happens in a very physically embodying way, in a conscious act of enabling and allowing the moment to arrive. This process is expressed by Keats in his letters (1891 p. 10) as he describes his agitation in the writing/creation of the poem, but in the poem itself the agitation is subtle, more like a tremor if felt at all, and lies in the symbols and metaphors within the poem.

### **The methodology of representing landscapes**

Understanding and knowledge about the history of place provides a point to write from with historians, anthropologists and creative writers contributing to the growing canon of post-colonial writing. Jay Arthur (2003) in her exploration of how language has historically influenced attitudes to place, documents that colonialists consistently viewed the landscape in terms of English perceptions of country and landscape (2003, pp. 1-3). The colours, vegetation and landscape of the English countryside were the default expectation in the thinking of settlers, explorers and visitors to Central Australia. The fertile green images of the English countryside were in stark contrast to the

Australian landscape, which was viewed as dry, barren and empty.

Ross Gibson, quoted in Bird Rose's *Nourishing Terrains* (1996, p. 18) comments on the 'English' imaging of country. He says: 'Every Old World hectare has been ridden over, written over, and inscribed into an elaborate and all engrossing national history.' Further to this, O'Connor mirrors Gibson's observations when speaking about the laying of history in Ireland (1992):

the landscape is thoroughly humanised. It is therefore imbued with cultural meaning, being the concrete expression of the states of mind, now and in the past, and just like a book or a parchment much written upon and written over, its interpretation awaits the discerning reader... (p. 8).

In Europe then, it might be considered that the country is written over by the people and in Central Australia the people are written over by the country.

Nicholson Gill proposes that the early settler desire to change and mark the land comes from a wider assumption of colonialism, part of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century 'European expansionism' as he explains:

The wilderness landscape is essentially unformed, chaotic, innocent and uninhabited. Classically, the garden is a step towards culture. It is the crucible of domestic life and the active transformation of the earth for human ends... (2005, p. 79).

The land was already and continues to be inscribed and mapped with the stories of the Aboriginal owners. The texts which describe the dreaming stories and legends including TGH Strehlow's work *The Songs of Central Australia* (Strehlow 1971), *The Arunta* (Spencer & Gillen 1927) and more recently *The Arrernte Landscape of Alice Springs* (Brooks 1991) speak of 'knowing' and 'being' with the land (Gill 2005, p. 78). Though writers of historical texts on language and culture until recent years have written as if looking through a 'white lens', as observed by Attwood:

Historians...have to rely on texts created by white people. We never have Aboriginal voices [in history] unless white people recount (and invariably reformulate) these in their writings (2005, pp. 159-60).

Carter (1996, p. 25) writes of the process of writing history, place and exploring characters to make a new history:

This process of bringing places 'into being' dissolves the distinction between autobiography and history; to affiliate successfully to the new environment was to be initiated into a new history, but also envisage different ways of telling history.

The enactment of the glimpse is about looking deeper than the surface of the landscape, the act of writing into it and acknowledging the history and how it informs our understanding of the place. The notion of the glimpse seeks to acknowledge the echoes of resonance in the landscape. This corresponds in particular to the work of Denning (2006) and Griffiths (1996) who describe history in a present sense, and depict history effecting place in an active way. Oodgeroo Noonuccal pointed to this in her landmark poem, *The Past*: 'Let no one say the past is dead. The past is about us and within us' (1966).

### **Poetry examples: Australian poets capture the glimpse**

To better understand the evocation of the glimpse, it is helpful to look specifically at writers who respond to their environment and evoke a sense of belonging in their work. These first examples demonstrate this sense of becoming and being, with reference to Australian poets whose work echoes the themes of our own.

Judith Wright:  
from *Dust*

This sick dust, spiralling with the wind,  
is harsh as grief's taste in our mouths  
and has eclipsed the small sun.  
This remnant earth turns evil,  
the steel-shocked earth has turned against the plough  
and runs with wind all day, and all night  
sighs in our sleep against the windowpane. (Wright 1995 p. 23-4)

Barry Hill:  
From *Back*

Returning inland  
    seasons later  
        a lizard waits for me.  
Clatter in the kitchen.  
    Length across the frying pan.  
        I thought it's thump  
and scuttle  
    a bird on the roof  
        it has striped rings  
runs of sand down its tail.  
        eyes like ants. (Hill 2001, p. 49)



Bronwyn Lee:

From *Seven feet and where they're from*

### **The Aboriginal Foot**

The woman's features  
are preserved on the eastern end

of the gorge, and her story is  
preserved in a dance at the base  
of the red rock, her daughter's feet  
dragging through the sand to leave  
the meandering tracks of a snake. (Lea 2001 p. 10)

Deb Westbury

From *Leaving Wollongong Harbour*

the trawlers  
are already parting the pink ripples of sunrise  
out beyond the breakwater.

the black wharf glitters  
with great drifts  
of wet-silver scales. (Westbury 2002 p. 18)

The final two examples here are representative of the work that echoes our own, in terms of location and theme:

In Central Australia, Meg Mooney:

From *Christmas*

Grey bead curtains of rain  
over the waterhole  
mud red water bubbling  
in our drains around the tarp.

gums danced golden  
in fields of couch grass  
the rock wall beamed  
red as ininti seeds. (Mooney 2005 p. 57)

From Central Queensland, Kristin Hannaford:

*Intertidal Zone*

only the trace of clayed footprints wind through the mangroves.

for here is the landscape full of bodily sounds, heaving itself fricative and hoarse  
reinventing terrain over and again with each shifting hour.

Scents of decay claw and rise quick with water when it comes  
(2004)

### **Mary Oliver and the experience of the 'glimpse'**

The 'glimpse' is a moment of distillation and inspiration that leads to the generation of a poem, achieved by complete absorption in the moment, observation of the senses and a deep awareness of the landscape. Poets have described this moment of revelation as being in the physicality of moment immersed in the landscape, or spiritually, where a revelation takes place, for instance in a moment of meditation, or in a dream (Magee 2009, Gilbert 2010, Lawrence 2012). But however the moment or glimpse may appear, it is not completely random. It presents as a result of intense knowledge and understanding of place through both the lived experience and through research.

As poets we strive for this moment of capture and when it is achieved the glimpse evokes emotion and nostalgia. As we write this into the landscape, we are also writing about the past - the history of place. This compels us to write of the troubled history as well as the beauty that rests in the land, thus the poems arise from an intuitive awareness as well as a deep consciousness.

Hirsch further describes this process:

...the words [come] off the page into my own mouth – in transit, in action.  
I generate – I re-create – the words incantatory, the words liberated and  
self-reflexive...in poetry the words enact – they make manifest –what they  
describe (1999 p.9-10).

The glimpse may be related to the idea of the muse or the creative spark but in our understanding of it, it relates to the inner versus outer landscape. In this rendering, the *outer* is about the landscape that is known – what we have seen and read. To the point where... 'a place has to become an inner landscape for imagination to start to inhabit [it]...' (Calvino in Gislason 2013 p. 16). To reach beyond this space, the writer or reader needs to bypass normal thought processes to access the richness of thought which will become a poem (Dillard 1990 pp. 10-11). Advice about turning off the editor comes into play. Natalie Goldberg suggests 'Let everything run through us and grab as much as we can of it with a pen and paper' (1990 p. 33) thus permission is given to get back to that moment and in doing so the reader can touch and reach that space and therefore that place. Described by Doris Lessing as 'wool-gathering', the process

requires switching off and entering an unconscious space of creativity, the 'creative dark' (in Brophy 2003 p. 220).

For the writer, there is a need to go to that place / location to write about it, and once there, to let go of external influences, and accept being entirely influenced by the outer world and landscape the writer is connected to at that moment. The *inner* of this scenario is the writing and using external knowledge to create that moment.

Poet Mary Oliver says such poems:

brim from the particular, the regional, the personal, and become – as all successful poems must –“parables” that say something finally about our own lives, as well as the lives of their authors... they glow with unmistakable universal meaning (1994 p. 80).

The poems speak and allow a truth to arise, often in a moment that surprises the poet as well as the reader.

### **Poetry examples**

The evocation of the glimpse within our work demonstrates the focus of the discussion thus far. This is the glimpse in action, bringing the reader to the place the poetry derives from. Each poem features an annotation to foreground the work in historical, cultural or personal frameworks.

#### **A tropical heart**

A tropical heart surrounds us  
Like the layers of a sugary Smoothie<sup>1</sup>  
Warm wet tenderness, protecting us from harm

A covering of rough spiked skin  
Defends our inner territory  
From conquering armies of ants

A crown of thorns signifies our stature  
Reaching the heavens with upstretched fronds  
The monarch of all we survey

My tropical heart beats softly  
Encased in this deep cavern of flesh

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<sup>1</sup> A Smoothie is a variety of pineapple.

A strong and steady systole  
Providing the backbeat for my very own one-man band

The daytime drama of life drowns out the sound down below  
The drumbeat lost in a cacophony  
Of chaos and chatter and cars

It's only in the stillness of a stolen moment in the sun  
You'll remember to listen for the rhythm  
Steady staccato sans stutter  
Simple solitary sound

A tropical heart hidden deep  
In a rainforest of lush undergrowth  
Ferns like fingers reach around the trunk  
Of a figure in celestial repose

A canopy covers everything  
Sheltering ventricle vegetation, and other organs  
With their particular sounds  
But they are quieter in deference to the steady thumping  
Of a tropical heart  
Keeping the beat for everyone  
In this tiny little town

So,  
When the sky goes dark and the night is still  
And the midge's mania subsides  
In the background, underneath it all  
You'll hear a sound that surrounds us all  
From within

Deep down where no one goes  
Lies a tropical heart, beating on

Annotation:

The principle form of agriculture in Yeppoon on the Capricorn Coast in Queensland is pineapple growing, with the most common variety in Australia Smooth Leaf Cayenne, or 'Smoothies'. The reliance of the local economy on this hardy tropical fruit is explored in this poem, captured in the underlying theme of the 'steady staccato' of a strong heart. Small towns and their industries are intertwined like blood vessels and ventricles around a major organ, and the language used to describe this relationship is often visceral: a small factory or plant can be referred to as the 'lifeblood' of a town, and the townspeople come to depend on it, suffering as the industry might suffer various 'health' setbacks.

Yeppoon celebrates the pineapple industry with an annual event called Pinefest, with parade, fair and exhibitions drawing visitors since 1962 (Queensland Museum, 2013) from around the region and state, increasing tourism dollars, a newer source of income for the region.

### **The eye of a needle**

The camels stride –  
*a fine string*  
*through the trees.*  
Cliffs rise red  
over the gap  
and the line of camels,  
thread themselves through  
one, two, three  
until they are gone.

Voices echo  
from inside  
the gap:  
Aranda men calling  
camel commands  
in Arabic –  
the rocks speak  
as clouds lick at the cliff tops.

The camels tread  
with ease  
through the country,  
and I am reminded  
strangely  
of rich men and the eye of a needle.

#### Annotation:

This poem arose from a line written by Bertha Strehlow. She wrote a great deal about the camels as she travelled with her husband TGH Strehlow across the desert, and as she got to know them wrote with increasing affection. ‘...a fine string through the trees’ is from her article ‘Through Central Australia’ (1940 p. 10). But as suggested by Gail Jones, the generation of a work doesn’t often arise from a clearly marked out plan. Rather it comes instead ‘from the fragment, the trace, the vague or barest intuition. From scraps...’ (1999 p. 314). This poem arose in such a way.

The phrase ‘a fine string...’ took my mind to the domestic and the possibility that Bertha would have had to repair clothes (and their swag sheets when they got caught in

mulga) in the isolation of the desert. My thought process then took me to the biblical reference of the eye of a needle. Central Australia was being colonised at the time the story is set and Aboriginal people were being actively encouraged to give up their language as well as their spiritual beliefs. The glimpse is attained as Bertha hears Aranda men calling to the camels in Arabic. This moment has magic in its strangeness.

### **Echoing and evoking the sense of longing**

The themes of place evoked in these poems resonate with a sense of nostalgia using a 'language of a condition of special use' (Steiner, 2010 p.72). Steiner's position on language and the use of words captures the sense of a place in the sound of the words, echoing perhaps the sound of the landscape.

This specialised language triggers emotion, pointing towards the 'glimpse' (Heaney, 1995 p. xv). The glimpse provides moments of revelation in the inspiration for the work and the distillation of emotion released through the reading of the poem, somewhere between 'the unconscious and the never-really-known' (Hetherington, 2012). This is the poetry of 'edge country', creating a sense of longing for what was, or what could be, within the place and the emotion of the place.

We conclude this part of the discussion with a visual demonstration of Paul Hetherington's notions of poetic space using images of our respective places, and thus the focus of our work.



Kemp Beach, Central Queensland – photo by Lynda Hawryluk



The Fitzroy Delta from the air, Central Queensland – photo by Lynda Hawryluk



Moon rise over creek, Northern Territory – photo by Leni Shilton



On the crest of Mt Phillips, Northern Territory – photo by Leni Shilton

## The glimpse as affective resonance

What one might experience by viewing the images of the places referred to in the proceeding writing is affective resonance. The effects of the glimpse can be examined in terms of affect theory (Tompkins, 1962) because the glimpse has a similar outcome of evoking response in the body, one experienced in its creation as well.

In *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962), Tompkins describes nine discrete affects operating on a scale from positive to neutral to negative.



The progression of these affects is seen bodily, often in facial expressions.

Much of the writing referred to here makes connections with the positive end of the affective response scale, and in a very subtle way. Tompkins' affect theory acknowledged the innate nature of affect; our responses occur bodily, and often unconsciously. Evoking a feeling, a sensation of place in the reader is so too an innate reaction but it comes with the permission of the reader who is seeking to feel that which the poet felt and experienced. The experience provides a moment where the reader "react[s] innately to the expressed affect of others as if it were our own, and therefore enabled to know a great deal about the inner world of those others" (Nathanson 2008 p. 5).

Tompkins called this affective resonance – how humans respond to each other via the 'transmission of affect' (Brennan, 2004). In writing, the experience of this is exemplified in the glimpse, which echoes back in a bodily expression to the reader. The poetry resonates in the reader, who is provided with a sense of the location being



described; the scenery, atmosphere, the physical sensation of being there. *Resonance* is responsiveness and this responsiveness is often physical.

Affect, Tompkins said, “makes good things better and bad things worse” (p.2)

This echoes back to the moment of the glimpse. The glimpse provides a sense of synchronicity for the poet and reader alike. This is evoked in the way a poet like Vivian Smith responds to place in his work about Tasmania’s rugged landscapes:

Water colour country. Here the hills  
rot like rugs beneath enormous skies  
and all day long the shadows of the clouds  
stain the paddocks with their running dyes.

...

the hills breathing like a horse’s flank  
with grasses combed and clean of snow. (Smith 2011p. 594)

In these words we see the evocation of the glimpse, written as a moment in time that echoes through the mind, resonates with the body and into memory. The language in Smith’s work here is sinister and evocative, beautiful yet alarming. In much the same way the discrete affects sit on a sliding scale, Smith acknowledges the dichotomy of the landscape, provoking a sense of dis-ease and discomfort that affects the writer and the reader alike.

The glimpse evokes a feeling in the reader in a similar way to the function of Jacobson’s Organ, as explained by Watson (1999). Jacobson’s Organ is a little known cluster of cells in the nasal cavity, which acts as a kind of memory transmitter. This is what is working when an odour evokes powerful responses including associated memories. The effect can be a physical response such as retching or crying; involuntary actions that inhabit the body at an affective level. Affect theory provides us with an understanding of innate responses to stimulus virtually out of our control.

How a writer provokes and stimulates this is with language, and with the effectiveness of description that brings a scene to life in more than just words. Stephen King explored this in the opening to his novella *The Body* (1982):

The most important things are the hardest things to say. These are the things you get ashamed of, because words diminish them - words shrink things that seemed limitless when they were in your head to no more than living size when they’re brought out (Introduction, n.p).

King describes here the frustration of not being able to capture something in words, or retell it to another so they have an understanding of its importance. The antithesis of this experience is the evocation of the glimpse.

As posited by Tompkins, affective response is the innate reaction to an emotion, and in relation to our understanding of the glimpse, this can be evoked by a word or phrase. It is the job of the writer to provoke this response in the reader, to provide for them the sensation they experienced at the moment of realisation. To capture a scene and its physical presence is like watching a human face responding in the way it evokes an automatic and natural response, and our innate reflection of that back is the glimpse. So a place that makes a poet smile and pause, or take a deep sigh is captured in language that evokes those feelings in the reader. It allows them that glimpse of the moment in the reading of the work. The glimpse then is a *bodily reaction* to words as much as an *evocation* in words. It is a complementary relationship representing synchronicity with the poet and reader.

Emily Dickinson describes this famously as equating to the most intense of physical sensations. She described it thus: 'if I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know *that* is poetry. I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry' (Dickinson in Hirsch 1999 p. 7).

The Australian poet Deb Westbury puts this in practical terms, explaining that '...the work is greater than its parts. Ideally it will cause the reader to feel something, to touch you, so that the reader is changed permanently by his/her encounter with the work' (2013). This is then the ultimate goal of the writer; the process of allowing the reader to see and feel what they did at the moment of the glimpse: a permanent change enacted upon the body and expressed in language and description. Poetry about place and landscape does this effectively, providing the words geographers couldn't find (Porteous, 1984). This corresponds to the ideas expressed by our colleagues in the field, of 'empathetically shar[ing] the writers' sense of landscape' (Berry, 2013 p. 85) and 'captur[ing] the essence of the places and landscapes' (Boyd, 2013 p. 99) in verse.

### **Poetry examples:**

The culmination of ideas, exemplified in words evoking the sense of our respective places, our responses to them, and the sense of longing that the places evoke in us is demonstrated in a final selection of poems:

#### **The sky is darker at night.**

A balmy breeze blows through palm trees  
Grounded deep in their natural environment  
Half asleep watching faint lights flickering in the distance  
They might belong to a car, a house  
Or something you don't want to think about

Every tree could be an abrupt ending to the journey home

And every shadow beckons you closer towards the dark  
A thousand eyes line the roadside  
Watching and waiting for the next car to pass  
A kangaroo court of voyeurs, ready to pounce

Driving along through endless inky night  
Belying a vast empty country; it's out there somewhere  
The car is cool and comfortable  
And gives a false sense of safety  
But it could all be over in seconds

The sky is much darker at night  
Without the benefit of the reflected light  
Of a humming cityscape  
A different kind of city sits out there in the dark  
Hiding behind bushes, away from the headlights of an oncoming car

Annotation:

The night sky has long been a subject of wonder among poets and scientists alike. Writers from such divergent backgrounds as Lord Byron ('Darkness', 1816), Wordsworth ('The sun has long been set', 1804), Rilke ('At the brink of night' trans. 1949), Frost ('Acquainted with the night', 1928) and Sexton ('The starry night', 1981) have sought to capture the appearance and depth of darkness that night provides and inspires.

DH Lawrence's 'Grey Evening' (1916) acknowledges what science knows: that the night sky is more complex a range of colours than simple darkness. Far from there being an absolute shade of black to the human eye, the absence of light is in fact a shade known as *eigengrau*, or 'intrinsic grey' (Blom, 2010 p.170). The sky in outback Australia looks darker at night due to the contrasting effect of stars, and the deeper one gets into isolated spaces, the darker this night becomes.

The Bortle Dark-Sky Scale (2001) provides a range of locations and their suitability for dark sky viewing according to visibility of stars and interference from light pollution. A large city (Inner City Sky), full of reflected light and neon, will prevent the human eye from detecting stars and is considered the worst location for dark sky viewing. The best locations are of course far away from cities, with their floodlights and high-rise buildings. The further one gets, the better the opportunity to see colourful and clear zodiac symbols and constellations in full.

Of course, the perception of the Australian Outback is that is a place with a dark heart; a place to be fearful of. From early depictions of the bush we see a reliance on imagery creating a sense of fear and distrust, which correlates with a pathological fear of the dark, *scotophobia*, a word derived from the Greek word for *darkness*. In pathological terms, Lyons (1985) says fear of the dark may not arise from being afraid of the absence

of light but because 'one does not know what may be out there in the dark' (p. 75).

### **Dream Language**

The Language felt in the rocks,  
on the air through grey leaves.

A land language I hear on my skin  
as it moves like a veil over my face.

Sound that touches under skin  
like water seeping through sand,

that birds know before it is sound.  
A scent cushioned on wind, on currents over hills,

in cloud,  
in rain when it finds itself falling.

The flick of a bird's wing,  
dust that falls as it turns.

And light, ragged on the horizon  
brushed orange in the mountain's profile,

a misted rainbow of colour;  
fading to dark, with dotted stars

lanterns to guard the cold night.  
All sound, like a long held note.

The language fades from my ears,  
but echoes loud in the land.

I move through rock,  
creep in the dark, watch the night animals come.

The dark a type of home,  
a tranquil breath

of giving in,  
giving up, giving over.

A small moment  
where all others wash off

into dreams  
and I stop worrying for the first time (Shilton 2014).

Annotation:

Historian Paul Carter examines the association between ‘travelling and dreaming’ as expressed by 20<sup>th</sup> century explorers in Central Australia, in particular in the writing of Ernest Giles who named the Petermann Ranges. Bertha’s dream state is explored by investigating the parallels in this imagined dream poem of Bertha’s with Giles’ writing: ‘Darkness began to creep over this solitary place...I coiled myself up under a bush and fell into one of those extraordinary waking dreams which occasionally descend upon imaginative mortals when we know that we are alive, and yet we think we are dead...At such a time the imagination can revel only in the marvelous, (sic) the mysterious, and the mythical.’

In his discussion of Giles’ writing Carter states:

... [with this reverie] the writer seeks to persuade us of the universality of his experience. Such transcendent moments are part of the explorer’s credentials. They are an indispensable element, if the biography is to be complete (Carter 1987 pp. 84-5).

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored and described a relationship to and reading of the ‘glimpse’, an evocation of place that provides an underlying philosophy inherent in the authors’ work. It does this by way of example, through our own work and that of Australian poets who take as their inspiration the Australian landscape. Our position is informed by this demonstration of our work and the work of other Australian poets, who use the moment of becoming and knowing to better express their connection to place, and allow a reader this moment in their own space, obviating distance and location. In this way this paper and exercise demonstrates the experience Keats famously described in his 1891 letter; the process of ‘negative capability’ and its usefulness for poets seeking to capture in words and mood the very essence of a place.

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