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Toward Place-Based Personhood

The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place by
TOM BRISTOW

Palgrave, 2015 \$67.50

Reviewed by **MARK DICKINSON**

“Knowing ourselves through places,” Tom Bristow writes in *The Anthropocene Lyric*, “is the most ancient and human attribute” (37). Industrialized societies, however, have lived by an increasingly diminished understanding of the necessary respiration between humankind and earth, substituting in place of this ancient sense of the integrity of all things a strictly materialist or resource-oriented perspective in which non-human nature is little more than a “gigantic gasoline station” (50) as Martin Heidegger put it memorably. One name we might give to this mode of existence in its zenith is the Anthropocene, in which the impact of human civilized effort on earth has been likened to an extinction level event. In keeping with the systems thinker and grandfather of the “ecology of mind” tradition, Gregory Bateson, Bristow points out that the devastation of non-human ecologies also involves the desecration of human interiorities: “The hubris of human existence and how we conceive of our agency has plummeted our future selves into mere shadows of what we can be” (6).

The gambit of Bristow’s book is that ecopoetry offers one path to a re-consideration of human positioning on earth. Lyricism, he notes, “configures feelings and structures thought; it reflects on our capacities as humans to fulfil our potential for experiencing joy, surprise and delight while honestly admitting pain, grief

and sadness into the home of our being” (3). By bringing us back to our senses and destabilizing our sense of human supremacy, ecopoetry and the thought-forms that sponsor it can nudge us from a one-dimensional instrumentalism toward “place-based personhood” (14).

Bristow tracks this nascent green consciousness in three contemporary English-speaking poets: John Kinsella, John Burnside, and Alice Oswald. In their works, he finds words alive to “the mutability of the observed and the observer,” alert to those moments when life “steps outside of an autobiographical frame,” and free of the self-absorptive tendencies of the confessional lyric voice (3).

Bristow explores how Kinsella’s poetry, composed in Western Australian landscapes, pushes against the pastoral in its struggle with the fundamental contradiction of home-making in a colonial context. Home, as the place where meaning is most readily available, is thrown into disarray by the awareness that Jam Tree Gully was taken by force from its original inhabitants. “Home does not begin to exist without a rupture to one’s conception of settlement, without journeying and movement,” Bristow writes (21).

In his compelling reading of Burnside, Bristow locates the poet at the intersection between a crowded field of intellectual and artistic ancestors, dynamic social histories, and a set of kinetic, ever-shifting landscapes that often pass through one another in the poet’s mind, contributing to a sense of “decentred habitus” (72). This volatile intersection, and the intriguing, four-dimensional “mythic ornamentation” it sponsors, troubles any simplistic notion of a “dialogue with the earth,” and provides the poetry of the

Anthropocene with its “most intriguing yet precarious subject” (73, 75).

Bristow’s chapter on Alice Oswald—the best of the three included her—considers the choral-like “sound maps” or “sonic census” she has composed to track and respond to riverine ecologies in her native Devon, bringing her closer into experiences of “place hood” and “place consciousness.” Here Bristow’s book edges ever deeper into the “ecology of mind” tradition mentioned above. He writes: “Place-consciousness understands the depths of being in an environment as something coterminous with an encompassing energy field, animating and plastic, partly constituting and constituted by the accumulated, spatial formation of the text” (79).

This is an excellent book, and one that confirms Bristow’s place at the vanguard of ecopoetic theorists. He brings together a veritable grammar of ecological consciousness—a bouquet of fascinating terms like “withness,” “flowforms” and “open self”—that deserves to be counted among the most substantial contributions to ecological philosophy since David Abram married the phenomenological with the indigenous in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996).

If my own vision differs slightly from Bristow’s, it is in my sense that the lives of ecopoets, and the circumstances through which they learned how to root themselves in specific places, actually matter—especially when doing so requires nothing less than a *pèlerinage* out from under the dominant thought patterns of industrial and colonial civilization (all we are told of Kinsella, Burnside and Oswald *as people* is that they are “contemporary”). “Although it is certain that a man’s life does not *explain* his work, it is equally certain that the two

are connected” (20), Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote. “The truth is that *this work to be done called for this life*” (20). Nothing could be more in keeping with the expansive spirit of ecopoetry than a re-appraisal of the points of connection between the text and the life that birthed it, complicating the human exceptionalism intrinsic to the biographical mode with historical, social, and ecological dimensions.

It remains for me to say that this is a profoundly *affective* book. Bristow clearly cares about these three poet-thinkers and the ecologies of presence that reverberate through their writings and into his in turn. *The Anthropocene Lyric* contains some of the most beautiful passages and turns of phrase that I’ve ever come across in an ecocritical text, evidence of an academic voice in the process of being gentled by way of a psychagogic relationship with its subject matter. Bristow remembers at a cellular level the spiritual genius of the landscapes of childhood and adolescence, and celebrates that genius through a vast ecology of reading and thinking that come together like “the orchestrated layering of fireworks in vast skies” (74).

Works Cited

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