

becoming | **semi-devotional**
Creating a Melbourne Beach Poetics | MICHAEL FARRELL

Like all texts, beaches have readers.

John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz*¹

ode ode

without gods now or light to speak of
eve
breaking hearts on the beach

—————
eve
without gods now or light to speak of

—————
—————
—————
—————
breaking hearts on the beach²

Dogs may well set up a sort of barking at the very idea of a Melbourne beach poetics.³ (They may not give up the privilege of romping in the water.) Others, sceptical of the use of the term poetics as a means of zhoozing or shoring up the aesthetics of an inadequate theme, may growl. And what of easy identifications of nature with forms of art? Are they just another form of greenwashing?

In their essay 'The Beach', John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner conclude:

It is this flexibility of the beach, its wide potential for meaning, that allows different sections of society to find in it different ways of articulating, different ways of relating to this deep biblical opposition between land and sea, or the basic anthropological one between culture and nature.

They also say that Melbourne bay beaches 'lack all the virtues and attributes of the mythic, ideal Australian beach' and are 'less natural'—and therefore more cultural: they're more built-up, have more formal entrances to the beach, and so on. Can Melbourne beachness be defined only in terms of lack? And what does this beachness mean when the ideal is defined by Fiske, Hodge and Turner in negative terms: 'no houses, no tents, no sandmining, no road and no way in except in bare feet'?⁴ Even Melbourne's lifesavers lack bronzeness if they rely on the weather, and naturalness if they rely on solariums. They also lack visibility—I haven't seen one at Middle Park for years, despite the 'Patrol Hours' sign.

These and other theories are based on the assumption that the mythical Australian beach is Bondi. The beauty of myth is that it can hold generalised figures while we forget about them and get on with the business of our lives: tanning, swimming, perving. Brian Matthews and Leone Huntsman both contradict this idea of myth, saying we don't have beach myths in the same sense as we do those of the bush, or of the soldiering nation (though Huntsman also suggests that the Anzac myth derives some of its power from its beach origin).⁵

To go back to culture—in an essential sense of the term—there are plenty of poems honouring Bondi and other ocean beaches, including those of Bruce Beaver, Andrew Taylor and John Blight. In Blight's 'The Beachcomber', an old man's eccentricity and quarrelsomeness is excused on the beach: he is likened to a poet. Another poem, 'The Headland', predicts the joining of the land with the sea:

picturesque

a half beige half blue acre friend
in black paddling in it man in red in the blue
are blue jellyfish some big as squid & some
fine like hats this depiction isnt pure still.
.continue before they kill you the shades created by an
old stone lifesaving club & changeroom that.
some sydneystyle call an eyesore its cool modest grey & restful european you

could say
like the man in red.
who looks tired & spent the last hour in a cafe
but thats reminiscence & has no place here.
.ok hearsay would anyone think the poem part of
the scene rather than memory.
.the seagulls & the waders human
.were there its over done the cools stricter rules are coming.⁹

I try not to use the word beach in poems too much. But the different things that happen at the beach, the different images that are part of its repertoire, its words, the lexicon of hope, desire and happiness that I associate with beach weather, all become part of my poetry.¹⁰ I read poetry on the beach. Elwood beach is the place I met an Italian reading a biography of Baudelaire in French—isn't this incident alone enough to justify a Melbourne beach poetics? Because Melbourne's myth is one of culture—which could mean we've some writing to do.

Lack as a definition of a beach: during my dreaming up of this essay, Middle Park, one of the beaches I regularly visit and the setting for the 'picturesque' poem, was washed away in a big storm. It also washed away some of the complacency I might have had about a bay beach poetics being calm and meditative—and provided images that suggest a poetry based on negativity and pollution; a poetry based on the collaging of beaches' natural debris—and extended by the plastic and driftiron the water spews up each day.¹¹

This poem 's&' refers to, incorporates the beach rather than presents it; and is (like a beach) more typically heterogeneous.

s&

when what you do intrudes embellishes & it all revolves
around the beach & it accretes in your workplace shop
office seduction chamber always reserving the heaviest sandiest ironies for
sex & it runs along the phoneline less emblematic &
less real as it goes how many does it take
how much in the black water can you summer comes
in fragments & goes like pigmentation couldnt it be disease

the same sad conversation however its easy to lose consider
the imagined drama swimming at night noone in sight church
bells ringing etc interrogate the etc my appreciation fuelled by
my disdain irritation with the heat & on the sensitive
covering called skin from the slide & the cold a
competition for to be dirt the pasts heaven & hell
it tells of a cupped hand made steady by mountains¹²

Not to blame the water for the pollution—and not that my image of meditation doesn't contain its own worms of reflexivity and pastiche wriggling over the mulch of romanticism ... I swam at Albert Park during the bushfires a couple of summers ago. The sky was full of smoke, the sun dim ... a scene of decay: *Death In Venice*. In March I swam in the cool late afternoon sun, the water reflecting like glass over a print of a tropical paradise. Nature fused with culture. Perhaps these moments are a poetics of being, of spirit? But that would be to privilege the highpoints. It's the dailiness of going, the modesty of answering 'I just went to the beach' when asked how we spent our day that makes a poetics—the knowledge that comes with familiarity: the reading. And as we approach winter, the voice that says to go to the beach—to put off any other plans, begins to fade and a new one begins, saying: type up those summer poems, write a paper.

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1. John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987.
2. Michael Farrell, *ode ode*, Salt Publishing, Cambridge, UK, 2002, p. 91.
3. John Forbes, 'On the very idea of a conceptual scheme', *Collected Poems*, Brandl & Schlesinger, Rose Bay, undated, p. 170.
4. Fiske, Hodge and Turner, quoting Craig McGregor, *National Times*, 9 January 1983, pp. 63–4.
5. Leone Huntsman, *Sand in Our Souls: The Beach in Australian History*, MUP, Melbourne, 2001, pp. 218, 197. Huntsman quotes Brian Matthews. Outside this history is homosexual beach culture, and, despite a chapter on popular culture, there's nothing about Australian pop music and the beach: Little Patti's 'He's my blond headed stompy wompy real gone surfie boy'/'Stompin' at Maroubra'; Australian Crawl's *Sons of Beaches*; The Triffids' *Born Sandy Devotional*; Mondo Rock's 'Come Said the Boy'; Split Enz's 'Shark Attack'; the surf-punk influenced sounds of Hoodoo Gurus; The Atlantics' 'Bombora' ('world class instrumental surf band'); Radio Birdman's 'Descent into the Maelstrom'; Dave Warner's 'African Summer'; Midnight Oil's 'Catch the Bus to Bondi', The Go-Betweens' 'Surfing Magazines', The Riptides; not to mention the music videos—from Cold Chisel to Gerling—shot on the beach: Australian rock culture is so infused with (dependent on?) the beach there's a book in it. (Thanks to Chris McAuliffe for some of these references, including the quote on The Atlantics). (Is it my waning awareness or has the theme of the beach declined since the 1980s?)
6. John Blight, *Selected Poems 1939–1990*, University of Queensland Press, 1992.
7. Mudrooroo, quoted in Leone Huntsman, pp. 210–11. These quotes fail to convey what a great poem 'Beached Party' is. Other great beach poems include Forbes's 'Breakfast' and Max Harris's 'On Throwing a Copy of the *New Statesman* into the Coorong'.
8. John Forbes, pp. 129–33. Perhaps the confident elusiveness of theme in Forbes's poem is a confirmation of Meaghan Morris's description of the beach as a '“deep-laid”, and thus ambiguous, reality of life' in Morris, 'On The Beach', *Ecstasy and Economics: American Essays for John Forbes*, Empress Publishing, Sydney, 1992, pp. 101–2.
9. Michael Farrell, 'picturesque', previously unpublished.
10. Police make a nice blue image, and can add a frisson of risk—given bay beaches' general lack of sharks.
11. Collaging seems an appropriate model if we think of the way beachlife's patched into our other ways of living. (Idea for a cheap date: spend a couple of hours on the beach picking up rubbish.)
12. Michael Farrell, 's&', *The Age*, 24 December 2004.