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Conference paper for July 4th 11.30 –1pm in room 803

Australian Eco-Pastoral Poetry

Les Murray and Judith Wright are two Australian poets who are widely read as landscape poets. A landscape poet is one who “paints” through words a picture of the landscape or brings the image of the land into the reader’s mind while reading the poem. While this framing offers valuable insights into their work it often fails to bring the importance of the land into a contemporary or active context or to recognise the long tradition Australia has had with , to use Leo Marx’ term, “the complex pastoral”. Marx’s term comes from his best known work *The Machine in the Garden* where he highlighted how settler American landscape always had the intrusion of technology and it was impossible to write pastoral poetry without recognising this fact. Leo Marx says there are 2 types of pastoral: The idealistic pastoral and the complex pastoral. The idyll pastoral presents an innocent past that is often in danger because of encroaching technology. In Marx’s complex pastoral the pastoral design circumscribes the pastoral ideal with a counterforce that undermines the idyll. The fables of old are limited—the resolutions of pastoral fables are unsatisfactory because the old symbol of reconciliation is obsolete. He states that America has a “complex pastoral mode”. While Marx’s work has come into some criticism because it represented the United States as too monolithic and universal it still is important because it identified the complexity of the pastoral form in America. John Bryant says “Marx contends that the American experience has been based on the pastoral ideal—the sentimental belief that man can live in a ‘middle landscape’ situated between nature’s primitivism and civilisation’s authority”. But this is a myth and is an impracticable mode of belief (page 64, 2013). There is no “middle ground” where one can take the best of both while neglecting the impact of one on the other. Ruth Blair reminds us in her chapter “Hugging the Shore: The Green Mountains of South-East Queensland” in *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and their Writers* it is accepted that North America has a tradition of the complex pastoral mode but it should be remembered that Australia also has a long history of this form. Australia’s relationship with the pastoral mode has never been a simple one and from its beginning it has been hybrid in form and concern. In Louise Westling’s chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Environment* , 2014 says” British ecocritic Greg Garrad suggests pastoral is wedded to outmoded models of harmony and

balance or as American ecocritic Lawrence Buell asserts Pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without.

Both Judith Wright's and Les Murray's poetry encourages active campaigning for the environment. These Australian poets are eco-pastoral poets whose poetry encourages active reading rather than passive reflections. Their poetry speaks to the strong connection between the lived everyday landscape and the imagination of past, present and future. Their work is imbued with a strong sense of ecocritical awareness while at the same time drawing on pastoral conventions. Jonathan Skinner says that eco-poetics is the making and study of pastoral poetry. He goes on to say that in the making and study of eco-poetry certain poetic methods model ecological processes such as complexity, non-linearity, feedback loops and recycling. The represented action within the poems give way to poetic practice and the poems are filled with repetition and one voice responding to another voice. I think we can see these ecological processes in the works of both Les Murray and Judith Wright. I will discuss these processes later in relation to the chosen poems. These two Australian poets do not offer idealistic pastoral notions but rather reveal the complexities of lived human/nonhuman relationships. In relation to a voice responding to another voice I would suggest that it is the land that responds. This paper will discuss these complexities and how eco-pastoral poetry can be experienced as literature in action—ways for readers to connect with and negotiate with the land they inhabit.

The research for this paper was, in part, drawn from the responses that local community library groups offered after reading the works of these poets. What became evident from this research was the way the poetry made the readers think not only of landscape as a place of refuge from the urban technological world but also as a contemporary place with connection to agency that motivates readers into active change. After completing the community book club at the Sunshine Coast, a number of exit survey questions were asked of the participants. Their responses revealed a number of key issues in relation to how they had engaged with the set work. A number of the respondents said that the Australian poetry of Les Murray and Judith Wright had made them think about their relationship not only with other people but also with the land and animals far more than the novels. The poetry had made them reflect on the past but also think about the present and the future. The students were not studying the poetry

as pastoral poetry as such but rather they were part of a green reading group and were given texts that had some evocation of the environment. However, it was the students, themselves, who read the poetry and started to point out how these poets explored notions of the pastoral that were different to the Romantic poets. They remarked that the early Romantic poetry they had to read in relation to the pastoral had made them reflect and ponder on the past but the Australian poets of Les Murray and Judith Wright made them think of the present and future as well. Paul Alpers says that pastoral poetry is about the “ethical stability in one’s present world, rather than a yearning for one’s past” (Alpers, 37) and it is not only poetry of place but of ethos. It is the actions that result from or with the words. William Empson’s definition of the “pastoral process of putting the complex into the simple” is well known but the actual process of achieving this is often overlooked. I think Skinner’s processes provide a valuable way to approach Murray’s work.

Another point that came out of the survey was they had enjoyed reading the set novels but the poetry of Les Murray and Judith Wright enabled them to step outside the boundaries of their ‘conventional’ reading habits. The novels they felt were more interested in plot and character than place or more specifically they had read the novels within a framing of plot and character and place was a secondary consideration. When they read novels they immediately placed the human as the most important subject in the story and they read the plot to see what would happen to and with each human character. This goes some way in supporting Lawrence Buell’s idea that our reading strategies need to shift before changes to convention can change. He sets out four framing reading strategies for eco- critical reading and writing that suggest:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (2009, 7-8)

Glotfelty and Fromn, in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), define ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” and it is this relationship that remains the focus of all eco-writing. It has to be

remembered that there is no one singular framework for an eco-critical approach, however, underlying all of the differences in approaches is the need for a shift in perception in our understanding and representation of the environment. For this paper, because of time, I will concentrate on Les Murray's poetry although the book club participants also had to read Judith Wright. Two of the Les Murray poems that the book club had to read were "The Noon Day Axeman" and "Once in a Lifetime Snow,"

Noon Day Axe-Man

Axe-fall, echo and silence. Noonday silence.
Two miles from here, it is the twentieth century:
cars on the bitumen, powerlines vaulting the farms.
Here, with my axe, I am chopping into the stillness.

Axe-fall, echo and silence. I pause, roll tobacco,
twist a cigarette, lick it. All is still.
I lean on my axe. A cloud of fragrant leaves
hangs over me moveless, pierced everywhere by sky.

Here, I remember all of a hundred years:
candleflame, still night, frost and cattle bells,
the draywheels' silence final in our ears,
and the first red cattle spreading through the hills

and my great-great-grandfather here with his first sons,
who would grow old, still speaking with his Scots accent,
having never seen those highlands that they sang of.
A hundred years. I stand and smoke in the silence.

A hundred years of clearing, splitting, sawing,
a hundred years of timbermen, ringbarkers, fencers
and women in kitchens, stoking loud iron stoves
year in, year out, and singing old songs to their children
have made this silence human and familiar
no farther than where the farms rise into foothills,
and, in that time, how many have sought their graves
or fled to the cities, maddened by this stillness?

Things are so wordless. These two opposing scarves
I have cut in my red-gum squeeze out jewels of sap
and stare. And soon, with a few more axe-strokes,
the tree will grow troubled, tremble, shift its crown

And “Once in a Lifetime Snow”

Winters at home brought wind,
Black frost and raw
Grey rain in barbed-wire fields,
But never more
Until the day my uncle
Rose at dawn
And stepped outside—to find
His paddocks gone,
His cattle to their hocks
In ghostly ground
And unaccustomed light
For miles around
And he stopped short, and gazed
Lit from below,
And half his wrinkles vanished
Murmuring *Snow*

Earlier I said that Leo Marx identified 2 versions of the pastoral the ideal and the complex. However, within these 2 versions there are many sub-groups. Terry Gifford says that new versions of the pastoral are bound to occur because if nothing else the pastoral is adaptable but I must add at this point that I was

slightly overwhelmed when I started to research the number of prefixes that are now added to the pastoral, so many that there is now a term for these versions: Prefix pastorals:—which include post-pastoral, anti-pastoral— hard pastoral, poison pastoral, techno-pastoral, georgic pastoral, problematic pastoral, postmodern pastoral and urban pastoral to name but a few. However, all of these sub-groups point to the complexity of this form. The Australian poet, John Kinsella, says the pastoral can only be approached ironically in Australia because we know and have always known that there are no shepherds leading a carefree life on green pastures. Australian pastoral must always speak from a “post” position. I would also like to add another prefix that has been added to the poetry of Les Murray and that is sustainable pastoral, Sustainable pastoral is closely linked to ideas of eco-pastoral. Tom Wilson, like Jonathan Bate has, says “some of Murray’s work can be seen as “a song of the earth”, the kind of poetry we should be attentive to if we wish to dwell on the land in a sustainable manner” (in Wilson, 2013, 11). Murray’s poem “noonday Axeman” does not concentrate on introduced species of plants or animals. The human knows they are not the ‘original’ owner of the land but rather they are caretakers of it. They may use the resources it provides but must not overstep the boundary into total ownership or ideas that the land can be fenced and separated off into sections. The sound that is heard crosses the boundaries.

Gordon Sayre in “The Oxymoron of American Pastoralism” says “Pastoralism is foundational to ecological literary criticism not simply because it is a key trope of American exploration and nature writing, but also because it encapsulates the dilemma faced by environmentalists in industrial societies who need to simplify their lives and reduce their consumption of resources, but want to do so without giving up the pleasures and advantages of modern life” (In Sayre, 2013, page 17). Scott Hess calls for a “sustainable pastoral” but defines it in general terms as a call “to action and participation, rather than escapism” (in Sayre, 2013, page 17). Murray, himself, says he is far more interested in Boeotia than Athens or in the country rather than the city but his poems do not pretend that the city is not there. There is no idealised innocent country where you can escape and peacefully live out your days. The land is hard work but it is work that speaks even if through silence. Not a simple piping but to use Andrew Marvell’s phrase an “echoing song” that fills the space around him. Murray does not idealise rural life and landscape nor does he see country as a setting for innocence or the city as the place of sophisticated urban poets. Instead his poems speak of the complex processes that occur between land, human, and

nonhuman. Paul Alpers in speaking about Walden says “the making of sound is attributed to the woods alone—so the song is not what he utters but what he hears”. We also see this in Murray’s poem: “axe-fall, echo and silence”. The echo is the axe sound returning from the tree being felled but also the echo of all the other trees that have been chopped down. It is also the echo of the trees that have fallen because of the processes of Nature and it is the city reaching out into the forest. And it is more—it is the echo of the past, the echo of the present and the echo of the future all coming together to make the sound that the man hears. Landscape neither dominates the man nor is unduly responsive to him—but has parallel activity. And it is the tension that is felt between these two parallel activities that allows more activity to occur. Nature is more than the effect on the self or self reflection. It is not there only as a resource to be consumed and forgotten. The man may retreat into the city but he will return, or he may retreat to the country but he cannot stay as the country is not merely a backdrop onto which he can project his desires. Paul Alpers says that “pastoral conventions established or re-established connections in a situation determined by loss” (Alpers, 1983, *New Literary History*, page 296) but in this situation the loss is one that returns and reenergises and calls into action.

“Once in a Lifetime Snow” also is a strong eco-pastoral poem. The processes of the land are in action and cause the human to shift their perception and notions of conventional. The cattle are covered and their footprints cannot be seen. The paddocks are there but covered by the snow. In Europe these scenes would be conventional winter scenes but in this land it is unconventional- a reminder that convention may be changed with a shift in perception.

In conclusion, the reading group from the Sunshine Coast said they were surprised with how these poems caused a sense of restlessness. They wanted to do something that would aid in hearing more of these stories and this meant they also wanted to share these poems with more people. But they also expressed a need to do more than hear other human voices, they wanted to revisit landscapes and hear the voice of the land, they wanted to put these stories into action. The complex pastoral was not only about personal reflection and the past but about action and the future.