

SEVEN SOUTHERN AFRICAN POETS and the natural world

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An Atelier Paperback

Published by Atelier Books Ltd,
2953 Plaza Blanca, Santa Fe,
New Mexico, USA 87507

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Cover artwork © by Dan Wylie

Cover and manuscript layout by Bronwyn Tweedie

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ISBN 978-1-998965-07-6

In memoriam Jill Wylie

Seven Southern African Poets and the Natural World is essential reading for scholars and students of poetry related to the most pressing issue of our time. This erudite, sensitive collection of ecologically focused essays extends beyond the eponymous seven poets to encompass Southern African political contexts and poetic debates, as well as Western literary tradition

Professor Emerita Wendy Woodward, University of the Western Cape

From sacralization to despoliation, the richly diverse poetry examined in Dan Wylie's new book clarifies the range of human impacts upon and attitudes toward the natural world. Although the book focuses on southern Africa, this poetry is a deep window into the universal poetic process and its potential to move readers toward awareness, understanding, and action. Wylie has written a learned and lively introduction to southern African nature poetry, from //Kabbo to Eppel.

**Scott Slovic, University of Idaho,
co-editor of *Nature and Literary Studies***

What can poetry do to save the earth? Well, nothing, Dan Wylie begins. And yet! In this collection of sensitively calibrated readings, poems are our vectors of hope. Written from the perspective of our terrifying present moment of global environmental crisis, the book looks back to explore how each of seven southern African poets has written about the natural foundation of our existence. This makes for a sustained and attentive response to the textures of poetic language, and a substantial contribution to the emerging body of ecocritical work from the region.

**Professor Julia Martin,
University of the Western Cape**

Dan Wylie is Professor Emeritus at Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa.

Also by Dan Wylie:

Elephant (Reaktion)

Crocodile (Reaktion)

Intimate Lightning: Sydney Clouts, poet (UNISA)

Raven Games: New & selected poems (Netsoka)

Death & Compassion: Elephants in Southern African literature (Wits UP)

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Introduction

In his wonderful collection of essays, *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*, John Felstiner answers his own question:

Realistically, what can poetry say, much less do, about global warming, seas rising, species endangered, water and air polluted, wilderness road-ridden, rain-forests razed, along with strip-mining and mountain-top removal, clearcutting, overfishing, overeating, overconsumption, overdevelopment, overpopulation, and so on and on? Well, next to nothing. (Felstiner, 7)

A variation on W H Auden's dictum, "poetry makes nothing happen". Humans have danced, worshipped, sung, written stories and poems about our relations with the natural world and its non-human fellow-creatures for thousands of years, perhaps tens of thousands. Yet, in this so-called Anthropocene era of accelerating extinctions, habitat loss, and climatic disturbance, it would appear that poetry has entirely failed to save the Earth. But then, arguably, so has science. Scientists know more about the natural world than ever before, yet it dwindles ever faster. It seems that no appeal, whether to logic or to love, is currently able to withstand the juggernaut of commercialised technology, of wilfully self-blinding profiteering, of the sheer inertia of hungry human populations and accustomed lifestyles. As I was writing this, yet another gathering of world leaders was sitting down to discuss the ecological meltdown, at COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh. The place was swarming with hundreds of oil and gas lobbyists, while "activists" – people who insist we can and should live in a clean and healthy world – were sequestered in the desert and harassed by the police. All too predictably, the gathering once again failed to achieve anything of life-affirming substance. Just a few kilometres up the coast a multinational oil refinery was pouring poisonous residues unchecked into the Red Sea, incrementally killing off the unique and precious local coral reef. Even as the evidence of anthropogenic damage to the environment becomes incontrovertible, the destructive mechanisms ever clearer, exploration for yet more oil, coal and gas continues apace in some of the world's most sensitive environments, from the Amazon basin to the Congo's Virunga

National Park, from Alaska to South Africa's Wild Coast. Plastics production is boastfully projected to double in the next ten years; car manufacturers are still banking on turning out another 400 million cars; profligate meat-eating expands. And so on. Political leaders of even the world's most powerful nations, though full of rhetorical fury and promises, too often appear hamstrung and ineffectual. Sometimes it seems the only answer to this rampant insanity is grief and despair.

Yet perhaps without poetry it would be even worse. Poems that embrace or embody a nuanced spirit of indwelling, that linger over textures of intertwined life, that evince a love of the familiar natural companions of a localised ecology – the kinds of poem that Felstiner valorises in his essays – are equivalent to the innumerable albeit small-scale movements and organisations across the globe that protest more seismic testing or fracking, or clean up a river course, or restore a mangrove forest, or pioneer a poison-free farming method. They operate in the cracks between the shibboleths of Progress and Petrogovernment, like mosses or lichens between paving-slabs. Such poems and movements can and do redirect minds in more rooted, positive, compassionate, cooperative, ecologically sustainable directions. They are our vectors of hope.

Southern Africa suffers and participates in most of the environmental issues afflicting the rest of the planet, albeit with local nuances. Its constituent countries share with other colonised regions, from the United States and Brazil to India and Australia, the ecological impacts of European armed and monetised incursions, extirpations or corralling of local fauna and peoples, increasing dominance of imported crops and livestock, disorganised urbanisation and racially skewed land distribution policies, the dominance of mining and related fossil fuel-dependent industrialisation, and the inequalities generated by neoliberal globalisation – all those developments building towards what Patrick Bond has called “unsustainable South Africa”. As the various countries have staggered into so-called independence, from Lesotho in 1960 to South Africa in 1994, the environmental situation has, on the whole, only grown worse for non-human lives.

Ecological commentary today is dominated by the rhetorics of global warming, CO₂ and methane levels, ozone depletion, nanoplastics pollution, species extinctions, biodiversity and habitat loss, extreme weather events and “climate change”. Though the warning signs have been around for two centuries now, this terminology is of relatively recent provenance. Through the course of

the twentieth century – roughly the period covered by these essays – other ranges of language, expressing other ways of regarding and relating to non-human life, also emerged. Of the poets I explore here, Douglas Livingstone, being a scientist, comes closest to our contemporary stance, though Roy Campbell warned presciently of over-population, Ruth Miller wrote of oiled penguins and poisoned finches, and John Eppel laments the proliferation of urban trash. Occasionally the others also strike those strangled, elegiac notes that hint at the human threat to non-human life. But not all poetry referencing “nature” is necessarily “nature poetry”, evincing beneficent relations. Sometimes quite the opposite. In *Literature and the Crime Against Nature*, another collection of eco-literary essays, Keith Sagar loosely but usefully distinguishes three possible attitudes to nature:

first, that it is cruel, ugly, obscene, amoral – that life lived in accord with it would be “nasty, brutish, and short”; second, that it has its beauties and charms, but that these are irrelevant or seductive – a temptation away from truth or ultimate values, which are to be sought elsewhere; or third that, without turning a blind eye to anything in nature, it is still possible to find it sacred, and a source of permanent values. (Sagar, xv)

Of course there are an infinite number of variations and shadings between these stances, and more than one may be found paradoxically coexistent even within a single writer. Roy Campbell can be said to locate “permanent values” in African nature, but they are of a masculine, combative kind that another poet, finding a certain solace and belonging in that same environment, might find repugnant. The kind of sacralisation enacted in a pre-colonial society like //Kabbo the /Xam Bushman’s is very different from the phenomenological sense of interfusion expressed by, say, Sydney Clouts. Noel Brettell and Ruth Miller may show compassion towards certain creatures, but this is underpinned by a view of nature as unforgivingly Darwinian. Poets, like everyone else, are creatures of their time, and cannot be entirely fairly judged by our most up-to-date ecological criteria. The aim of these essays is – without abandoning our current perspective – to attempt an appreciation of each poet’s attitude towards the natural world on its own terms.

Since we all live – human and non-human, real and imagined – within a natural envelope of air and water, weather and gravity, rock and plant, almost

any text might be viewed and analysed through an ecologically informed lens – ecocriticism. Ecocriticism can help direct us towards understanding the spoken or unspoken environmental stakes, the terrors or the beauties of non-human presences, the prevailing ecological consciousness, and the role of literature in affecting that consciousness. It helps to historicise and contextualise literary works within more-than-human frames, to answer broader questions of how we got here, how and why various participants think and behave as they do, and where we might turn in future. On occasion, it is illuminating to read against the grain. We might observe, for example, that Clouts, writing an elegiac poem about Cape Town’s pine trees, finds value in them quite apart from their alien-invasive status. His ignoring or not recognising this now prominent debate in ecological circles is itself evidence of a certain societal blind spot, while it by no means invalidates the poem’s personalised insights.

Ecocritical stances are themselves various and proliferating, sometimes overtly activist, sometimes contentious. Approaches may be aesthetically or scientifically inflected; Marxist or feminist; materialist or posthumanist; postcolonial or multispecies. This volume is not primarily a work of theory, so does not engage at length with these more cerebral debates or leanings, each of which might enable different readings. Though it’s a veritable industry across the globe, still somewhat dominated by Anglophone models and schools of thought, ecocriticism as an academic discipline in southern Africa remains comparatively underdeveloped. A decade ago I attempted to summarise the state of our ecocritical practice (Wylie, 2011a). I noted that we lacked even basic surveys of animals and plants in our literatures, let alone fishes or insects, and had produced no comprehensive study of the concept of *wilderness* in its subcontinental manifestations. Somewhat self-servingly, I foregrounded the existence of the annual Literature & Ecology Colloquium, which I had founded in 2004 to bring like-minded ecocritics together, and hopefully develop new ones. It highlighted a number of environmental themes, from forests to birds, from seashores to deserts, from notions of belonging to issues of pedagogy. I’m delighted to report that following my retirement the colloquium continues, now under the auspices of Amazwi Museum of Literature in Makhanda. As ever, though, the products of such colloquia tend to be patchy in quality, with disjointed papers published in isolation in scattered journals. That said, encouraging interventions have been made in the last decade. In the same year as my survey, Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers published an important collection of ecocritical

conference papers, largely South African in focus, *Environment at the Margins*. In their introduction, the editors stated that, while Africa is becoming less marginal to global environmental discourses, “upon closer examination ... what we see is an imagined Africa occupying a place-in-the-world assigned to it in the age of imperialism: nature, absent of people, and Edenic, in need of salvation from its own inhabitants” (15).

While that patronising Edenic thread persists, I think the picture is now more complex, balanced, indigenous and multidisciplinary, thanks to ecocritical work from scholars resident throughout the continent. In Southern Africa alone, we can point to new contributions in Critical Animals Studies (Wendy Woodward); in Critical Plant Studies (Erika Lemmer); on environmental and conservation history (William Beinart; Rob Nixon; Jane Carruthers), wilderness and rewilding (Duncan Brown), oceanic and littoral perspectives (Isabel Hofmeyr, Meg Samuelson, Charné Lavery), and on petro-cultures (Philip Aghoghovwia). Antony Vital and Byron Caminero-Santangelo have made particularly impactful interventions in postcolonial ecocriticism.¹ Other often exciting studies are spread through specialist journals and unpublished theses. Still, innumerable openings exist for further exploration, perhaps above all in the ever-marginal field of poetry (though some relevant poetry anthologies have appeared²).

The essays collected in this volume present some of my own efforts over the years to point readers towards the ecological facets of some particularly prominent poets. Some first appeared as journal articles or conference papers, and weren’t originally intended to be linked up. In no way are the seven poets offered as being representative of anything, of the region’s countries (I treat here only South Africa and Zimbabwe) or ethnicities, of its biomes or history, of broader developments in poetry or the contemporary obsessions with race,

1 One might particularly highlight Woodward’s *The Animal Gaze* (Wits, 2008); Rob Nixon’s now almost legendary *Slow Violence* (Harvard, 2013); Fiona Moolla’s collection, *Natures of Africa* (Wits, 2016); Wylie and Joan-Mari Barendse’s collection, *Dogs in Southern African Literatures* (Van Schaik, 2018); and Caminero-Santangelo’s *Different Shades of Green* (University of Virginia Press, 2014). As the field becomes more interdisciplinary, the edges of purer “literary studies” blur, so we might go on to cite many more “cross-over” studies, too.

2 Notably, Gus Ferguson and Tony Morphet’s *Birds in Words* (Umuzi, 2006); Harry Owen’s *For Rhino in a Shrinking World* (Poets Printery, 2013); and Wylie and Patricia Schonstein’s *Naturally Africa!* (African Sun Press, 2019).

gender and class.³ As it happens, all the poets (bar Ruth Miller) are male and (bar //Kabbo) white. Since virtually no Southern African ecocriticism can be conducted in isolation from the imperial and colonial histories and economies touched on earlier, the question of white belonging in the region does emerge as something of a sub-theme. (Being myself one of those anomalous “white Africans”, this is also of personal significance.) Another repeated emergent motif is that all the poets evince degrees of departure from or scepticism about an imported Romantic aesthetic baseline. The Southern African landscapes – often dauntingly rugged mountains, searing desert, or steamy coastal forest, replete with all-too-visible predators and tracts of thorn-bush – had seldom lent itself to the rhetorics developed in hyper-domesticated England. Little wonder, I guess, that much of this work is underpinned by a certain harsh realism. A survey of a different range of poems might yield a different impression, but these writers constitute at least a thread of colonially-rooted unease with their literary forebears.

These particular poets, over the course roughly of the twentieth century, often commented upon or read one another, or were indirectly linked through the editors of small poetry magazines, and at times directly corresponded. I’ve used these connections to draw the chapters together a little more tightly, though they doubtless still bear the impress of their individual origins. For want of a better organising principle, I’ve arranged the poets by date of birth. Chapter One is a slight departure from the general pattern. In this chapter, the testimony of //Kabbo (born ca. 1810) to Wilhelm Bleek in the 1870s is the centre of gravity. The chapter is, however, as much about twentieth-century reworkings of his *kukummi*, or stories. A number of white writers and poets, from Laurens van der Post to Antjie Krog, have produced idiosyncratic versions, and the chapter probes reasons for this fascination with the sub-continent’s most famous autochthons, its textual difficulties and results. I concentrate on the most substantial of these efforts, Alan James’s *The First Bushman’s Path*.

Of all the poets, Roy Campbell (1901-1957) alone failed to refer with some romantic nostalgia of the “Bushman”. He is often touted as South Africa’s first

3 I am perforce, through my own limitations, confined to English-language work; this is not for a moment to demean the region’s many other languages. I know that ecocritical work on Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Portuguese and Shona literature is being fruitfully pursued by other scholars.

really good poet, even though he spent less than half his life here. His vigorous and highly-coloured poetry, much of it acidically satirical, drew heavily throughout his life on the imagery of African animals and wilderness. Though steeped in a masculinist and predatory attitude towards the wild, reminiscent of a previous generation of hunter-explorers, he was as scathing about colonial society as he was of effete Bloomsbury. Chapter Two suggests that a deep-rooted ambivalence about the natural world is key to understanding his oeuvre.

N H Brettell (1908-1991) is one of two Rhodesian/Zimbabwean poets included here. An English immigrant, he lived a long life and produced some of the country's best poetry. Like his Shona part-contemporary Musaemura Zimunya,⁴ he became deeply attached to Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands, where he lived in a cottage until driven out by a guerrilla attack in the 1970s war. This humble teacher's evocations of Nyanga's dramatic landscapes and waterfalls, its mammal, bird and insect denizens, are sharply delineated and loving, yet underpinned by a view of natural life that is unflinching, even at times apocalyptic.

Chapter Four explores the ocean-, animal- and bird-related poetry of Ruth Miller (1919-1969). One of the most impressive poets of her time, she is distinctly more modernist than Brettell, whose careful verse seems rather old-fashioned nowadays; critics have bracketed her with Clouts and Livingstone as "late modernist". However, she shares with Brettell a hard-edged view of natural rigours, its rapacity as well as its precarity. Some of her poems have attained the status of virtual classics in the genre.

I've written at book-length (2011b) about Sydney Clouts (1926-1982), in my view one of the region's most beautiful as well as intellectually and formally challenging poets. He produced only one slender volume of poems in his lifetime, his ability to publish apparently eviscerated by his emigration to England from his beloved Cape Town. Though he objected to the label of "nature poet", he wrote continuously of that locale's mountains and weather, its rocky coastline, its trees and birds. Chapter Five focuses only on the last-named aspect, probing the multiple meanings for Clouts of his eagles and pigeons and sparrows.

As I mentioned earlier, Douglas Livingstone (1931-1996) is the only scientifically-trained poet included here. Scientific practice, based on an ecologically-orientated world-view not so evident in the foregoing poets,

4 See Wylie, "Mind has Mountains": Poetry and ecology in eastern Zimbabwe", in Robert Muponde and Ranka Primorac, eds. *Versions of Zimbabwe* (Weaver Press, 2005). The region is also my home ground, hence a certain special fondness.

suffuses his voluminous and varied oeuvre. This is especially so of his last and defining volume, *A Littoral Zone*, which delineates what might be termed a “bioregion”, in this case the South Coast of Kwazulu-Natal. Along this edge or ecotone, stations at which he measured pollution levels gave Livingstone a structure within which to explore varied aspects of human-natural relations.

Chapter Seven returns to Zimbabwe and the poetry of John Eppel (b.1947, and still living at the time of writing). Like his predecessor Brettell, an immigrant and an educator who survived the liberation war and stayed on into post-independence Zimbabwe, Eppel is devoted to the craft of poetry, often using traditional forms. As wedded to the environs of his home city, Bulawayo, as Clouts was to Cape Town, he writes frequently of plant-life, especially flowers. Through them he explores more thoroughly than most of the other poets the particular ambiguities of white belonging in the postcolony. Strongly influenced by Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Keats, Eppel is paradoxically closest to the Romantic aesthetic popularly associated with “nature poetry”, albeit shot through with a slightly acerbic modernity, a satiric edge spilling over from his several novels.

*

In their attitudes towards the natural world, these poets often agreed neither with one another nor with our current ecological stances. What they share, however, is a call to pay close attention to “Nature”, how to depict it and evaluate our place within it, and above all how to deploy our strangely developed capacity to care about it.

Chapter One

//Kabbo Sings the Animals

Not one of the poets explored in this book fails to write at some point of the “Bushman”. That autochthonous figure – wrinkled, ochre-skinned, wise-eyed – haunts all of Southern African literature. “He” is the originary inhabitant, the barely-subsisting survivor of white genocide shouldering the imaginarium of colonial guilt. In his primordial naturalness, he is the antithesis of centuries of industrial ecological destructiveness, of Western over-consumption, of coldly parsing rationalism. The nomadic hunter-gatherer life, often romanticised, is seen as embodying the unitary, mythic, instinctual, and sensually immediate. The Bushman is, in short, a perfect vector for poetry.

Ever since the first notable colonial poet, Thomas Pringle, wrote in “Afar in the Desert” of the Bushman who ran by his side – diminutive, loyal, and voiceless – white poets have pursued a peculiar fascination. Roy Campbell alone wrote mockingly, in relation to the Bushwoman’s steatopygia. Douglas Livingstone calls the Bushman “symbiotic man” in his poem “Eland at Station 17”. Ruth Miller is more tangential: her poem “Mantis” alludes in a shadowy way to /Kaggen, the trickster-god of the Kalahari Bushman. Sydney Clouts looked to the Bushman for an essential shamanic energy which he tried to capture in the clicking rhythms of his desert-set poem “Firebowl”. N H Brettell wrote in his memoir, *Side-gate and Stile*, of finding in the “dim overhangs and half-caverns” of central Zimbabwe’s kopjes “those silhouettes of hunter and quarry limned with a delicate vivacious genius” (66).

There must have been Bushman poets, singing beneath and to and through the surfaces of their paintings, for hundreds of years before the white men came. Perhaps thousands. But how are we to know of them now? Apart from a few obsessively-studied remnant groups in the deserts of the Northern Cape and Botswana, they are all but faceless, and in their oral context ineluctably anonymous, their poetic creations more communal than individually

acknowledged or owned.⁵ The advent of print, which irrupted onto the subcontinent simultaneously with guns, the fence, and a monetary economics, changed everything. It is almost exclusively through print that we can know anything of pre-colonial Bushman poetics now – a tricky process of translation, filtering and refraction, doomed to imperfection.

Who was //Kabbo?

If we can locate a single known Bushman poet – if we can technically call him either Bushman or poet – it is a man who emerged at exactly that nexus of print, firearms, farming and money. His name was //Kabbo. He is not quite faceless: we have some photographs, from the very dawn of that technology, taken in the early 1870s. Today, his craggy, lined face peers from almost any treatment of the Bleek-Lloyd Archive of /Xam “Bushman” testimony, in which these photographs are housed. //Kabbo is iconic now of the whole enterprise of restoring the “Bushman” to a proper place in history. He has literally become a tourist attraction (see Davie). He has a whole book named for him, Janette Deacon and Pippa Skotnes’s *The Courage of //Kabbo*. All this because he originally supplied the philologist Wilhelm Bleek and his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, with some of the richest bodies of oral lore from a single individual of the time.

But can we really know who //Kabbo was? Was he a *poet*? We think we know certain details of his life (see Bank; Brown, *Voicing*; Deacon and Skotnes). He was a so-called “Flat Bushman” from near Kenhardt in the Northern Cape; he had been arrested for sheep-stealing and imprisoned at Cape Town’s Breakwater Prison. Along with other /Xam detainees, he was discovered by Bleek who, recognising a potential ethnographic resource, was able to house them in the garden of his Mowbray home, and embark on what would turn out to be our most extensive collection of Bushman testimony. Then aged in his sixties, //Kabbo was noted by Bleek as a particularly adept performer of *kukummi* – the Bushman term for stories, legends, myths, songs (it transcends and blurs Western generic distinctions). He was possibly even a shaman. One thing we know he was not: an example of some antiquarian, pre-colonial purity of hunter-gatherer life.

5 This is not to ignore various groups who identify as “San” or “Khoisan” to this day, significantly still fighting for formal political recognition and, like Australian Aboriginals, producing artwork as much modern as drawn from historical modes.

Such purity had long gone, if it had ever existed. //Kabbo himself related his responses to invasion from Boer farmers, his farm work, his train journey to Cape Town; he was already deeply imbricated in modernity. A real enough life; yet our experience of him now is inevitably purely textual, and much of our impression of him is derived from the quality of his testimonies, the *kukummi* themselves. In other words, “our” //Kabbo is primarily a literary construct – in some ways his own literary construct – successively re-inscribed and re-imagined through layers of poetic (mis)interpretation.

Equally slippery is the identification of the “/Xam”. Unlike the !Kung or Jo’hoansi groups, who still exist in some form to be exhaustively studied, the /Xam can now only be imagined. As Anne Solomon has noted, all the scholarship notwithstanding, “we still know remarkably little of [their] cultural identities” (333). And who are the “Bushmen” more broadly? The extensive literature exploring the provenance and implications of the various ever-controversial names – Boschesman, Bushmen, San, Khoisan, abaTwa, Basarwa – is riven with arguments about how coherent or unitary a sub-continental culture such a name might refer to. Edwin Wilmsen argues that Western anthropologists essentially *invented* the “Bushman” in order to “certify [their] own ontological quest”(24).⁶ He is echoed by Robert Gordon, who writes in *The Bushman Myth* that

the overwhelming textbook image is that they are *different* from us in terms of physiognomy, social organisation, values and personality. When we were lounging with a smug sense of ethnocentric superiority in the Victorian era, we saw the Bushmen as the epitome of savagery. But later, in the turmoil of the 1960s, when students were asking serious questions about the nature of Western society, social scientists reified the Bushmen’s egalitarianism and generosity, virtues seen to be seriously lacking in Western society. If Bushmen did not exist, we would surely have invented them. (Gordon, 217)

6 Wilmsen’s term finds parallels in other studies, such as Declan Kiberd’s *Inventing Ireland*, and Shlomo Sand’s *The Invention of the Jewish People*; more relevantly, Leroy Vail and Landeg White’s “Invention of Oral Man” in *Power and the Praise Poem*, and Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Invention of Tradition*. If nothing else, such studies suggest that most human identities are imagined, if not wholly invented – and there is no reason not to expect something similar of the “Bushmen”.

In sum, “there is in fact no ‘real’, definitive Bushman for anthropology to discover” (Barnard, 144). Further, as David Chidester, drawing on the fieldwork of Matthias Guenther and Alan Barnard, suggests:

Bushman religion is ambiguous because the narratives of myth and folklore do not necessarily coincide with the practices of ritual and art [...]; it is heterogeneous due to regional differences in religious beliefs and practices[...]; it is fluid because symbolic resources are deployed and adapted to meet the challenges of changing historical, social, and economic situations; and it lacks standardisation. (Chidester, 51)

This is one problem: that “Bushman” or even “/Xam” beliefs are too heterogeneous, fluid and unsystematic to be reductively comprehended and represented.

This leads to a second problem: that in the initial laborious process of translation and transcription, testimonies such as //Kabbo’s have already become distanced from any culturally authentic performance and context. It was such an “authentic” performance Sydney Clouts tried to capture in “Firebowl”. But he had never himself witnessed such a thing, and was patently dependent on the writings of Laurens van der Post – whose own veracity is in some doubt. So the myth builds, affecting the slew of poets over several decades who have endeavoured to refurbish //Kabbo’s *kukummi* for modern audiences: among them G M von Weilligh, Jack Cope, Stephen Watson, Antjie Krog, Harold Farmer, and Alan James (on whose work I will focus in the rest of this chapter). Even as they try to restore the lost people to a validated place in the national consciousness (and conscience), are these poets not taking us even further away? If no “authentic original” can be securely located any more, what are we to make of these new versions and echoes? Can Alan James’s versions of //Kabbo’s testimonies be approached as a legitimate branch, as it were, of an inherent /Xam heterogeneity? Certainly James himself justifies his project in this way. Like some previous “versioners”, he draws gratefully on //Kabbo’s own reported satisfaction that his *kukummi* – ownerless, malleable “stories that float from afar” – were being extended into print (James, 19).

If we cannot securely delineate the “Bushmen”, it would seem we are not in a particularly good position to delineate their relations with animals and their ecosystems. This has not prevented numerous writers generalising about them,

from the everyday realities to their avowed mythic, folkloric or other artistic expressions. That attitude is, stereotypically, said to be spiritual or religious, reverential, symbiotic. The shaman “sings the animal” in trance-dance; the hunter feels his prey in parts of his own body; the presence of the hyena is made richly meaningful by tales told of its origins; everyday conflict between men and baboons is both made intelligible and lamented via a myth of how they once spoke the same language. Such mythologising, it is often claimed, evinces an organic relationship with animality of a kind that “the West” has lost or derides. However, such meanings differ radically from one group, period, or occasion to another. The highly variant meanings accorded the mythical /Kaggen figure is a well-attested instance.

The upshot is: we are not going to learn only one thing about animals here, rather a palimpsest of meanings, accreted, entangled, and always inflected by our starting-points. We are, our best post- or de-colonial intentions notwithstanding, ever in danger of reifying precisely the categories and divisions we seek to supersede. Anne Solomon may be right that there is “no ultimate escape from this dilemma”. She nevertheless usefully calls the poetic versions such as Stephen Watson’s and James’s “contemporary curations” which, rather than offering monocular meanings, “juxtapose perspectives, pointing instead towards the contingency of interpretations and power/knowledge strategies” (330-6).

Bearing these caveats in mind, let us focus on Alan James.

Who is Alan James?

James was a fairly well-established poet in South Africa before he published his Bleek-Lloyd versions in *The First Bushman’s Path* in 2001, on the cusp of his emigrating to Australia. By then he had two substantial volumes of poetry to his name, *Morning near Genadendal* (1992) and *Ferry to Robben Island* (1996). One of the points of interest here is how the modernist (even postmodern) stylistic and spatial techniques of these collections are reprised in the //Kabbo version-poems. How much, in other words, are the latter //Kabbo, and how much James? The same question attends other poets’ ventures. Stephen Watson’s versions in *The Return of the Moon* (1991) are stylistically quite distinct, in some ways reflecting the languid, overlapping rhythms of Watson’s own poetry. Similarly, Antjie Krog’s versions (first in Afrikaans, then in English as *The Stars Say T’sau!* (2004)), both

reflect her own consideration of the /Xam-Dutch-English nexus of the Bleeks' translation processes, and some of the stylistic features of her other poetry (see Wylie, "Strangers").

We can exemplify a number of issues so far identified in one of the //Kabbo versions included in James's *The First Bushman's Path*, "//Kabbo Sings the Animals". This poem seems little more than a kind of chanted list, a meditative enumeration, not very interesting on the page.

the little snake
the little snake
the little snake
the little snake
the little snake

the very little snake
the little coloured snake
the small coloured snake
the small snake

the small snake
the black snake
the long black snake
the long yellow snake
the long thick snake

the long thick snake

the puff-adder
the puff adder
the puff adder

(//Kabbo sang)

What's most interesting is perhaps the title: not "//Kabbo sings *to*, or *about*, or *for* the animals", but "sings the animals", as if bringing them into being, as if organically deeply connected to them through the power of song itself. In a way

this is so, since right now those animal presences are being “sung” into our own minds. No doubt James has arranged the text – its snake-like longitude, the centring on the page – in order to evoke some originary dance or chant. This is distinct from other poems in the volume, which James arranges visually quite differently, to achieve different effects. Here, for instance, is a second poem – “Hyena fears the Fire” – which strikes one as more intriguing:

hyenas eat meat that is raw,
and they eat ostrich eggs that are raw, that are cold,

they all eat things that are raw
for they keep no fire, they fear the fire, they run from fire,

for they remember how the hyena mother once burned her feet
when she stood on the coals of a fire at the Dawn Heart’s house:

for she had feared his assegai (//Kabbo explained) [...] (James, 61)

From these opening lines we might draw some observations. Firstly, it is distinctively *poetic*. It is euphonious, lyrical, centred on the page, laid out in couplets, without punctuation. It is structured and repetitive, again evoking the rhythms of an oral dance-song, but this time with longer lines. Secondly, it announces itself as *testimony* by a specific individual – the parenthetical “(//Kabbo explained)” – so we are assured that this was delivered at a specific moment and situation in history. Thirdly, the poem evokes an *animal presence* that is an amalgam, a complexity. This includes a) empirically-observed hyena eating-behaviour, distinguishable from the human (cooked *vs* raw); b) legendary “explanation” of why the hyena’s paws are now black; and c) the evocation of a mythical era when humans and hyenas were in communicative harmony. The poem thus arguably manifests a certain democratic equality, an ecology as much cooperative as competitive, with an underpinning of reverence or respect. It would appear to support what William Adams calls

a more pluralist understanding of different understandings, meanings and values of biodiversity. There is already widespread acceptance that

indigenous or traditional knowledge is highly relevant to ecosystem conservation. Compared to modern science, such knowledge may be holistic and adaptive, gathered over generations by observers whose lives depended on its use. (Cited in Miller, *Empire*, 17)

It also echoes Eustacia Riley's overview of /Xam religion, which is suggestively liminal:

[The hunting ground] was a frontier and theatre where a constant and mythical struggle for existence was enacted by extraordinary and often supernatural characters and which the /Xam narrators portrayed as a place of lamenting, creating, killing and becoming [...] a place where 'reality' or temporal certainty [...] was constantly being interrupted by beings and powers from another dimension. (Riley, 292)

Such valorisation of "indigenous Bushman" eco-knowledge is indeed widespread, ranging from James Workman's argument in *The Heart of Dryness* (2014) that Bushman lifeways offer crucial skills in an increasingly water-poor world, to Patricia Glyn's 2013 account of contact with contemporary Bushman Dawid Kruiper:

It is common for people who do not appreciate the restorative value of nature to dismiss the Bushmen as 'backward'. Too often the politically powerful who hold the fate of Africa's First People in their hands fail to understand just what the Bushmen lose when they are ripped away from the wild places that bring them joy and balance. [...] For we were all Bushmen once upon a time, and their all-knowing oneness with the Earth, its systems and inhabitants is what we lost when we left the 'bush'.

Our psychological trauma at this separation from source manifests in dysfunctional and violent societies, wholehearted disregard for nature's bounty and a terrifying assault on her creatures. (Glyn, 141)

Western projections

That "Western" – now globalised – modernity has proved unprecedentedly destructive of ecosystems and their animal denizens is beyond dispute. Whether

resort to “indigenous knowledges” such as the Bushman’s can actually be efficacious is less certain. The more suspicious commentators recognise that critiquing the West *via* the “primitive” is less often a lived actuality than a literary trope. The trope goes back at least as far as Michel de Montaigne’s essay “On Cannibals” and migrates into the present through Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “noble savage”, Laurens Van der Post’s books of the 1960s such as *The Heart of the Hunter*, and contemporary filmmakers who “have encoded a parable which keeps alive the idea that modernity might still save its own soul and restore something of the ecological balance destroyed by industrial society” (Tomaselli, 206-7). The //Kabbo poems cited so far seem to echo that “parable”. They are, however, inflected by a number of inconsistencies, ambivalences, and complications that manifest general epistemological problems in assimilating the avowed “holistic” attractiveness of indigenous knowledges.

Is James then merely reiterating and entrenching a highly problematic myth, or can we derive genuine value and insight into human-animal relations from his approach? Is this primarily an exercise in literary criticism, assessing the formal and affective qualities of the poems *qua* poems (how do these works make us *feel* about the animals depicted)? Or is it primarily an empirical-historical question of what we can learn about the “Bushman” *qua* Bushman and “his” relations with animals and ecosystems (what can we learn *of* this primordial state-of-being)? Or is it primarily an ethical search for more holistic, temperate or compassionate ways of treating animals *qua* animals, with the implication that certain current treatments are unsatisfactory (what can we learn *from* that state-of-being)?

Animals depicted as integral components of a functioning ecosystem, both apart from and within the Bushman imaginative universe, seem generally to have escaped sustained anthropological and ecocritical attention, even though the ecology of a hunter-gatherer society necessarily underpins absolutely everything else we might say about //Kabbo’s /Xam society. This is true also of the poetic versioning of the Bleek-Lloyd material, including *The First Bushman’s Path*. The large number of poems therein that involve animals demand attention. Of //Kabbo’s contributions, at least two treat of a mythical primordial time of greater human-animal congruence, “The things of /Kaggen speak” (James, 42) and “The animals become animals” (45). “The lion eats all things” (60) is a chant descriptive of the lion’s omnivorous power; “Springbok ewes in autumn” (64) celebrates the rainy-season springbok migrations; “*Sho/oa* makes the game

run foolishly” (70) treats of a hunter’s magical medicines. The life this points to is not always Edenic or safe, as //Kabbo notes in “The story of the wounded hunter” (81-4) and “//Kabbo and /Han≠kasso speak of drought” (111). Ultimately, //Kabbo also relates the breakdown of /Xam society, in nostalgic vein in “The First Bushman’s path” (137-8) and “//Kabbo tells the genealogy of !Khi-ttu” (139). Interleaving these poems with related accounts by other informants, James chooses an overall narrative arrangement, from mythical “First Race” times through thematic concerns such as magical medicines and rain-making, to the dissolution of the /Xam. He excludes, notably, some of the most immediate and personalised experiences contained in the Archive. This very selectivity raises the problematics of extricating “indigenous knowledge” or a comprehensive animal ecology from the volume, however much the poems appear to evince just that.

James communicated to me that “there was no initial ‘fascination’ with the San people/culture or with the Bleek & Lloyd material: it was merely a case of executing a literary task” (pers. comm. 16 August 2006). That task arose, he wrote, because on emigrating to Australia he “felt an obligation to make some positive gesture, literary or otherwise, as a mark of respect and gratitude to the people/country/personal connections I was abandoning”. As he researched, the /Xam material became “compelling”:

The more I read, the more I began to see the San people as creators and inhabitants and possessors of a rich world, but also as victims of the greed and power of other races, black, brown and white. The horribleness and selfishness of human nature, the shallowness of contemporary Western civilization, glared and brayed in stark contrast to the traditional San values of sharing and egalitarianism and living lightly on the land. (ibid.)

This arguably courts both stereotyping and an invented or vicarious nostalgia. These hazards are in a sense addressed, however, by the very act of “versioning”, of broadening the testimonies out into a more accessible poetic form. As James told Duncan Brown:

It is an artist’s vanity to assert that literature and the other arts speak for those who cannot speak – just because they have been stopped or dissuaded or discouraged or disempowered from speaking – whether

through personal disability, oppression, capitalist exploitation and trivialisation, or extinction. I wish that my poem-versions, and through them their aboriginal narrations, might speak of, and with, the /Xam people who have been extinguished. I also wish that the poems might confront and teach and remind and expose. It is literature's task to point and to prod. (Brown, "Interview", 171)

To "speak of, and with", not "for". Can one say the same of the animals in the poems? The ecological dimension was not a particular focus for James, though ecological values inevitably emerged, he wrote, that "challenge many of the values that we hold today: respect for the natural order, regard for animals as subjective sentient living things, fellow creatures of the land, not just as food and as objects to be exploited [...] My work certainly reflects the notion of a traditional 'ecological community', and just as the /Xam texts unconsciously celebrate it (see for example //Kabbo's singing of animal names), so my work also celebrates it" (pers. comm.).

The phrase "reflects the notion" is crucial here: James's versions are not an unmediated representation of that long-obliterated "ecological community" rooted in indigenous knowledges, but an *idea*, a literary projection, of such a community. As several reviewers agree, James is satisfyingly aware of the possible ethical objections to his enterprise – that it might be "appropriative", might "obscure and subordinate" the narrators, or involve a "romanticization" and "excessive othering" (James, 20-1). He is alert to the tendency – inevitability, really – that the testimonies can become mere "objects", exploited

to make things that are other than what they are: they are made into quotable bits of evidence to develop or support a proposition; they are made into cleaned, modernized versions of the texts in part-substitute for the real thing, and they are made to perform the guise of poems. (19)

James nevertheless defends his doing exactly this, arguing that such modernisation is our only means "by which the veil of primary otherness might be pierced or lightened". He aims to make obscure or awkward locutions in Bleek's original transcriptions more "accessible" to the "general reader", to perform a "vitalization" of "slumbering" material (19). What may be read by the English-speaking reader as "vital" and comprehensible, however,

presents the problem of whether this in effect continues to draw on hoary stereotypes, either of the “Bushmen” or of “poetry”. Is it not analogous to the bowdlerisation of Lakota life-ways performed by imported Indians for Carl Hagenbeck’s circuses in Germany around 1910, or indeed the Bushmen in London notoriously derided by Charles Dickens half a century before that?

Questions of genre

So was //Kabbo a *poet*? Since /Xam *kukummi* do not conform in any way to Western genre-definitions, it is intriguing that to so many writers *poetry* has seemed the best medium in which to reflect our concerns with the vanished ecology of the /Xam. The implications are complex, even if one feels, as Antjie Krog and Alan James both do, that the testimonies “naturally fell into poetry” (Krog, 10). On this view, oral-performance delivery and unpunctuated, free-verse, modernist poetics fall unexpectedly into step. This is not a strategy confined to this case, or even this continent. As James explains, he was stimulated by another particular poetic transnational project, the “versioning” of native American stories and songs by Ernesto Cardenal in a volume entitled *Golden UFOs: The Indian poems* (1992), poems that struck James as “lyrical, historical and contemporary, and democratic” (pers.comm.; cf. Brown, “Interview”, 155).

As we’ve seen, and as is clear from his commentaries, James often deploys the poetry to reflect a performative aspect to the *kukummi*, largely through rhythms and repetitions. However, there is no original performance to draw towards: even //Kabbo’s recorded testimonies were extracted in a Cape Town garden under highly artificial, dislocated and laborious circumstances. Moreover, James frequently combines different testimonies, sometimes from more than one informant, in order to compile a certain picture. The choices being made here are thus primarily stylistic rather than either representational or objectively historico-anthropological.

Not everyone, therefore, entirely approves of the choice of *poetry* to represent a /Xam “reality”. Rock-art expert David Lewis-Williams, for one, has objected to the poets’ “prettification” of the testimonies, arguing for prose in his own compilation, *Stories that Float from Afar* (2000). Those same prose-narrative transcriptions, however, have themselves not escaped being selected, edited and massaged in order to conform more closely to Western preconceptions of coherent “story”. Narrative coherence and meaningfulness are equally culture-

bound: *kukummi* may present some overlap with story intelligible to a Western or English-speaking reader, but also baffling differences. In effect, our contemporary writers select from the archive that material which “makes sense”, and re-shape that which doesn’t. This affects anthropological writing, too: Wilmsen has shown how previous writers deliberately omitted “modernising” aspects of the Bushman groups they were studying in order to construct a picture of their “purity” which had already become both false and partly irretrievable.

Anthropology retains a somewhat besmirched reputation in the southern African context, detractors emanating even from within the discipline. Outsiders, too, have persistently critiqued academic anthropology as distinct from a more empathetic lived experience or what are now called “embedded” or “participant-observer” standpoints. Laurens Van der Post was an early such critic. He tried to bypass “expert training or special knowledge” and “let my experience of the primitive pattern of creation speak for me” (*Heart*, 129). He wanted to be a “bridge” between that “totally discredited” Bushman world and the bleak, “number-obsessed” present, and

to translate this Stone Age idiom into a contemporary one and to try and show that it is important to us that have all the power that those values should not disappear; that in fact they should be honoured in a contemporary way in our own spirit and society. The Bushman was a walking pilot-scheme of how the European man could find his way back to values he had lost and he needed for his own renewal (Van der Post, *Walk*, 26).

Van der Post elected to effect this bridge through “mythology and legend and story”, particularly those of animals (27). Paul John Myburgh more recently echoes this anti-intellectualism in *The Bushman Winter Has Come* (2013). Having himself been initiated into shaman-hood amongst the /Gwíkwé, Myburgh disparages the condescension of “armchair anthropologists” (3-4), and envisions the “interconnectedness” of all life through one old Bushman, writing:

I begin to comprehend the depth of his relationship with the earth ... an intimate companionship without boundaries ... communion on a level as profound as life itself ... a sharing of common truth ... All the animal forms ... the gemsbok, the lion, and the ostrich echo thus within ourselves

as human types, and in this correspondence we open a whole world of understanding in ourselves in Nature. And this was how it always was with the First People, in the time when there was only one language spoken by all of God's creatures ... (Myburgh, 66; ellipses in original)

Interestingly, Myburgh (like Van der Post) immediately quotes //Kabbo's version of the hunter feeling the prey in his own body – leading one to question just how much *is* really experiential and how much is already refracted through the literature. Myburgh's view is echoed by James's:

Animals were worthy of consideration for a number of reasons. As animal-people they were once, together with the First Bushmen, members of the early race. Consequently, they shared a common history with people, and some animals still retained a residue of humanness within them. Animals accordingly had value and mystery in being both same and other. They were also creatures of interest since they were companions with people in the mysteries of life and death, and they shared with them a common habitat. They were rarely out of sight and out of mind's sight, so that people possessed an intimate, detailed knowledge and understanding of their various features, habits and characteristics. But animals also had economic, ritual and symbolic value. Not only were they food, but they could also be used as counters or powerful metaphors in shamanistic healing, out-of-body travelling, rain-making, and the influencing of game availability. (James, 176)

For his part, James's poems are both dependent for resonance upon, and distinctive from, the extensive anthropological paratextual notes he adds to explicate them. This textual split somewhat reflects that broader dichotomy in Western thinking between a neo-Romantic personalisation of imaginative experience – the “lyric” – and an objectifying or quasi-scientific, prosaic anthropological gaze upon the Other. In a sense, the poems *are* anthropology's discontents. They offer something that such anthropology cannot – the affective, individualised, imaginative, empathetic dimension.

So one can read the poems, in one mode, as fatally compromised by their own textual provenance. That provenance stretches from the initially problematic translation processes within Bleek and Lloyd's colonial-era source-archive,

through the post-apartheid politics of racial guilt and restitution, to the uneven business of twenty-first century publishing. In another mode, however, one can read them primarily, a-historically, as free-standing works of the *imagination*, affective immediately and in their own right.⁷ Perhaps we effectively read in both modes in oscillation. This is the compromise literary strategy suggested by Duncan Brown in his chapter on the /Xam in *Voicing the Text*, one that hovers between accessibility and the retention of strangeness.

Empathy, belief, imagination

Others are disparaging of the oft-cited “bushman’s letters” (see Wessels), that avowed physical resonance between hunter and quarry that sometimes extends, in the *kukummi*, to entire bodily transposition. Keyan Tomaselli cites the zoologist Charles Handley, who hunted with the Ju/’hoansi in 1952 and said that hunters merely thought “like the animal enough so that they soon knew what its strategy was, where it was going. [It was] not some kind of mystical ability unknown to outsiders[:] the ability to track is learnt, not genetically encoded” (Tomaselli, 205). Lewis-Williams and Pearce assert: “One should not suppose that the San were credulous enough to believe that the rain *was* an animal. //Kabbo [...] said that the rain’s ribs were, in fact, ‘long, dark, thick clouds’” (141). Lewis-Williams and Pearce explain such imaginings as “metaphors of transposition”, which to a degree is fair enough, but they do so in the interests of establishing *fact*, not ultimately illuminating the deployment and the *why* of the imaginings themselves.

At issue, partly, is the problem of the articulation of *imagination* and *belief*. How does the modern sensibility convey the values of that “other” culture if one does not oneself believe, say, that baboons and men did once share a language, or that the shaman really does channel access to the ancestors, or that he really can change into a lion? Do we deny that the /Xam *did* believe, say, in the efficacy of shamanistic powers actually to call the rain (//Kabbo claimed as much for himself), since that would deny the very basis of our interest? Conversely, people

7 A somewhat analogous case might be how one responds to an historically non-specific novel like Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Shaman* (2014). While recognising that the narrative draws on a range of reading and research about Stone Age peoples, with echoes in North American, African and Aboriginal mores, we respond to it primarily as story, not as accurately representative of a particular society, or necessarily bearing a political moral.

everywhere do *make stuff up*, with and without ideological purpose, with and without communitarian effect. I doubt that Alan James actively believes what //Kabbo apparently believed, but his poetry presents, one might say, a belief that he did so believe, and that such belief-patterns can in some fashion still be valued. At the same time, James evidently feels the beliefs need to be *explained*, in classic positivist anthropological fashion. Hence, for the first poem, “//Kabbo sings the animals”, since the recitation itself seems to the modern reader rather meagre, he supplies a full three-and-a-half pages of dense commentary. He notes, for instance, that an original performance might have been characterised not by the apparent randomness but by an underlying hierarchy of creatures, or by a sequencing of sounds in /Xam; in analogy he quotes at length Megan Bieseke’s analysis of another dance-performance altogether.

In practice, regarding virtually any artistic expression, the reader almost ineluctably both draws on and moves beyond pragmatism, historical sources, and textual provenances. So I think, all the cautionary contextualisations having been uttered, we have to view both /Xam *kukummi* and James’s poems equally as imaginative heterogeneous works-in-the-present, neither more nor less detached from their textual past than any other text, drawing on “Bushman” indigenous knowledge but not simplistically representational of it, both specific in its political history *and* more generalisable in its animal-presence value implications.

American poet Adrienne Rich said that she wanted not to write poems *about* experiences, but rather poems *as* experiences. The poet discovers something unexpected in the very act of writing, and something of the frisson of that discovery is conveyed, hopefully, to the reader. Alan James’s account of his enterprise seems to me to carry some of that energy of discovery. What emerges is thus both his and not his, him and not him, neither fully objective nor entirely subjective. It evinces, in a way, what all writing does. On the one hand, it is inevitably verbally and formally derivative and therefore heterogeneous (Mikhail Bakhtin insisted this was true of every utterance). On the other hand, it expresses Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” (1981). The poem endeavours to “swerve”, in Bloom’s term, away from its source even as it necessarily cleaves to it. James achieves this by “versioning” the Bleek-Lloyd translations, holding more or less faithfully to their diction while deploying the poetic techniques of global Modernist poetry. It’s a delicate dance between strangeness (of content and belief) and familiarity (of form and language).

We thereby also critique our own culture(s), often less by objective criteria

than by an enchanting misunderstanding, or what Bloom might call “creative misprision”, sustained by an agenda of empathy. Just as one might admire an example of Bushman rock-art as a remarkably “accurate” representation of an eland, say, one might in the same breath valorise its non-realistic “distortions” (over-elongation of the legs), reading them as serving, perhaps, a shamanistic impulse of some kind. The same goes for these poems, I think. Their heterogeneity, their empathetic animism, their “translation across multiple *umwelts*” (Richard Nash, in Cole et al, 93), is their strength.

To read a poem

It remains, then, to attempt the improbable: briefly reading a final poem through the multiple facets of animal studies, ecocriticism, and postcoloniality. “//Kabbo and Han≠kasso speak of drought” reads in part:

the /Xam people do not kill frogs, because if they do
then the rain does not fall, and the land becomes dry:

it is when the people kill frogs that a drought comes;
and it is when a drought comes that people grow thin;
then it is that the locusts and the springbok vanish;
then it is that the bulbs and the bushes wither away;
then it is that the land turns white as it dries out;
and then even the *gambro* dries so that it poisons us;

[...]

drought held fast, and Tsatsi could not shoot any game,
and ≠Kammi died because she could not get meat to eat. (James, 111)

There is much here to exemplify the foregoing discussion. First, that the piece has a title at all signifies the authorial intervention, a signal that this is to be a self-enclosed artefact in the manner of the conventional Western lyric – very different to the often rambling, disjointed narratives actually recorded, sometimes over days. In certain ways, then, the poem both reflects and effaces the tortuous process of how the original translation came into being.

Secondly, the title alludes to James's periodical resort to more than one informant, the conflation of in fact three distinct testimonies in order to form a new assemblage, this one centred on drought experiences. This drifts, very slightly, towards that stance which conflates what all "Bushmen" thought, those of a putative "'baseline monoculture' who precede and thus transcend all of the other divided groups of the land [...] symbolically decentring competing nationalities" (Guenther, "Contemporary", 104). However, if the piece thus seems to exemplify a somewhat un-individuated "/Xam" event, it also endeavours to secure its reality in individual people and relationships (≠Kammi, "Han≠kasso's maternal grandmother who was Tsatsi's first wife", as James explains in the Notes (223)). Nevertheless, it is a partially fictionalised amalgam.⁸

This is reinforced, thirdly, by the form. In James's print version it is strictly justified both left and right, a rigid paragraphing effect closer to prose than poetry. This is very different from how it appears in the original notebooks; it evokes narrative rather than lyric, signalling a certain proximity to the modern novel. In this way it announces its own textuality, its emplacement within modern print, publishing and reception realms. This runs slightly counter to the repetitive phrasing redolent of oral performance, including the anaphoric "then it is". Further, the slight archaism of the language (*then it is that, held fast*) – holding fast to the Bleek original – pulls back towards the sense of "pastness". In this lies a tinge of nostalgia, of necessary temporal difference – a condition, in effect, of postcoloniality, both inheriting and resisting the anxieties of colonial domination and destructiveness. The differentiation is enhanced by the retention of one /Xam word, *gambro*, explained only in the Notes as a kind of cucumber or melon, one of the last to wither in drought. In short, the product is multi-generic, embodying a recognition of "messy, material, and embodied contingency", a "mongrel" quality (Wolfe, in Cole et al, 102).

Part of what has largely been destroyed, of course, is that particular, hunter-gatherer human-animal-plant ecological nexus, one which rested partly on sets of magico-spiritual, or animist, beliefs. Here one belief is that killing frogs, thought to have "paranormal" connections with rain, has the cosmic effect of inducing drought. This example underlines the fragility of the ecology itself, of human dependency upon an animal-populated environment, the /Xam people's close observation of it, and a mythic sense of continuity in and

8 Cf. for example Lewis-Williams's selective version in *Stories that Float from Afar* (78).

with it. But James, in this and a group of related poems, seems rightly concerned to dislodge the Romantic or Rousseauesque stereotype of the primitive-but-affluent ecological Eden. These people live lightly on the land, to be sure, but are also extremely vulnerable, in some ways hardly to be envied. Moreover, /Xam relations with animals displayed here are literally a world away from modern concerns: they have absolutely nothing to do with “animal rights”, “conservation”, or extensive domestication in their current usages and applications. The magico-spiritual belief system is a world away from both the scientific consensus and the mesh of monetary commerce. Melvin Konner, who spent some time amongst the !Kung in the Kalahari, has asserted in *The Tangled Wing* that there is simply “no going back” (Konner, 8). So is there any substantive way in which we moderns can connect with this alternative eco-animal world? One suggestion lies in a re-conceptualisation of the term “animist”, one that releases it from anthropological disparagement by a monotheistic West of “superstitious” Others.

A poem like “Hyena fears the fire” evokes a worldview justifiably characterised as animist. Animism encompasses those systems which in some form have governed most of human spirituality for tens of millennia, sustained by both everyday praxis and artistic performance. One current definition of animism is Bron Taylor’s:

Animism is a term that most fundamentally reflects a perception that spiritual intelligences, or life-forces, animate natural entities and living things. Animistic perception is often accompanied by ethical beliefs about the kinds of relationships people have or should have with such beings or forces, or conversely, what behaviours should be avoided with regard to them. Animism may also involve communication or even communion with such intelligences or life-forces. Such a worldview usually enjoins respect if not reverence for and veneration of such intelligences and forces. (Taylor, 92)

In this perspective, Nurit Bird-David argues in an influential essay, instead of a “modernist epistemology [that] is a totalizing scheme of separated essences”, one entertains “a plurality of epistemologies by refiguring so-called primitive animism as a relational epistemology. [Thus] ‘meaning’ is not ‘imposed’ on things – it is not pre-given in consciousness – but ‘discovered’ in the course of

action; it is also both physical and psychical, yet neither” (Bird-David, 74). To illustrate: in one dimension, an epistemology of hyena-presence “arises from the stories” (74) told about it; in another from closely-observed real-life behaviour; and in a third unfolding, active relations of mingled fear, respect and ecological competition. Such perceptions are not locked in the past, but feed organically into present situations and responses.

So *The First Bushman’s Path* may be interpreted as exemplary of a respect-orientated recognition of an animistic heterogeneity, in which successive historical periods and developments, geographically distinctive bioregions, cultural beliefs, human-animal representations, and various poetic forms coexist, in simultaneous tension and reinforcement. In these poems, we encounter an entirely novel “assemblage” or “reterritorialisation”, as Deleuze and Guattari might term it. We can continue to hope, or suspect, that there is something enormously valuable to be learned here. It may be that *The First Bushman’s Path* is not only a fascinating, eloquent, symptomatically complicated elegy to the /Xam, but also to something in ourselves – including a certain animal awareness of our own heterogeneity.



Chapter Two

Roy Campbell Stings the Rotting Wastes

Sydney Clouts, writing to fellow-poet and patron Guy Butler in 1967, recalled the “blue thunder” that sparked his enthusiasm when he first read Roy Campbell’s poetry at the age of seventeen. Understandably, he was then susceptible to the elder poet’s imagistic power and technical finesse, traits he would continue to praise. Campbell exemplified for him the way in which a poem could achieve “ignition” in a Blake-like fusion of opposites. By the time Clouts gave one of his rare talks, in 1980, he had come to recognise that Campbell’s “radiant gifts” were “somewhat fixed along certain lines”; there was “a certain rigidity in structure” (in Butler & Harnett, 12). But he read out one of Campbell’s most famous poems, “Autumn”, which embodied for him “that transformation of one person’s experience in a perfect realization in form of multifarious experiences.” The poem begins:

I love to see when leaves depart
The bare anatomy arrive [...]

Contrary to the elegiac lushness of a Keatsian autumn, Campbell valorises the stripping down of a landscape to its essential truths, to a manly hardiness. The setting of that poem is also testament to the pervasive presence of the natural world in Campbell’s work and consciousness. Indeed, it’s surprising that ecocritics have so far ignored him. Virtually all criticism has focussed on his satire, the socio-racial import of a clutch of favoured (and belaboured) South African-set lyrics, and, more recently, efforts to rescue his craft and imagistic power despite his rather unfortunate right-wing politics. Clouts was onto the natural element early, in a fashion, including Campbell as subject in his 1971 master’s thesis, alongside Thomas Pringle and Francis Carey Slater. In the thesis, entitled “Violent Arcadia”, Clouts set out to assess the influence of the “Arcadian” or “pastoral” poetic tradition on his three predecessor South African

poets. This focus entailed an exploration of a problematic central to Clouts's own poetic practice: how an English-speaking Southern African poet, steeped in the phrases and tropes of highly-domesticated English traditions, is to find or forge a language better suited to the radically different "wild" landscapes and inhabitants of the local environment. (We will observe this struggle in the cases of Noel Brettell and John Eppel, too.)

The African and natural elements in Campbell's work, I will suggest, remained integral to his thought – inconsistent over the years though that thinking was. Much more might be made of the prose works than I do here, and much more made of his response to South Africa's and Rhodesia's landscapes. I will touch on those, but will concentrate rather on his depictions and deployment of wild animals, through which and against which he continually measured his own and others' manliness, verve and authenticity. This wildness – part experienced, part mythologised – hovers still behind the later expressions of masculine derring-do, such as his equestrianism in Provence and bull-fighting in Madrid. I will discuss some further aspects of Campbell's "ecology" in a more modern ecocritical light than Clouts's now rather dated methodology. Some of the questions prompted by an ecologically-orientated reading are the following: What might explain the Darwinian vigour suffusing Campbell's deployment of African natural presences? How do his attitudes towards the natural world articulate with attitudes towards race and politics? How might we now view his works' refraction of the ambiguities of settler belonging?

Beyond the cane fields

Campbell was born into the contradictions of the colonial presence in 1901. He liked to characterise his family as "only soldiers, scholars, athletes, poets, doctors and farmers" – never effete "shopkeepers" or politicians – though at least some relatives were engaged in the less hardy activities of milling and marketing sugar-cane in Natal. Though he came to know southern African landscapes pretty well in his youth, he left South Africa for England and Europe at the age of eighteen, returning – married and already an acknowledged poetic talent – only in 1924. His effort to galvanise what he saw as the racist, money-grubbing torpor of colonial society through a literary magazine, *Voorslag*, did not last long, and he left for England once more, returning only once fleetingly in 1954. The rest of his life he spent in England and Wales, in Provence, Portugal, and finally

Spain, where he evaded the horrors of the civil war but was eventually killed in a car accident, in 1957. Along the way, he produced several autobiographical works, each successively embellished with Quixotic and doubtful colour, and a number of volumes of long satiric and of more conventionally lyric poetry. Despite his long absence from South Africa, African scenes, peoples and animals continually feature strongly and repeatedly, permitting South African poets and critics thoroughly to claim him as in his time the country's most robust and artistically accomplished poet.

As for his personal experience of the developing domination of wildness by industrial-scale agriculture, it's not easy to filter out truth from exaggeration and fantasy. He chose to depict the city of Durban – anachronistically called “Port Natal” to evoke its fragile beginnings – as “a trading settlement in the middle of thick bush populated by elephants, lions and mambas” (*Horse*, *CW* III, 168).⁹ This picture both suppresses the presence of numerous Zulu-related peoples living in the vicinity, and exaggerates that of dangerous animals. It is filtered through a “comic story called *Donogoo-Tonka*”. In this story, according to Campbell, “thousands of dupes”, dumped by a bogus emigration scheme in the Brazilian jungle, are “forced to create, drain, and build this El Dorado of their dreams on the spot by sheer hard work – or perish!” (169). This is “sheer fable”, he acknowledges, though it carries what will become a familiar anti-imperialist bite, and draws on both literary and historical precedent (Thomas Pringle's 1820 Settlers spring to mind). Inevitably, literate Europeans from their first arrival tended to view African landscapes, its aesthetics, its wildness and strangeness, through inherited mythic and poetic lenses. Layers and varieties of Arcadian imageries, drawn from Classical models, sometimes uneasily overlapping with those of the Biblical Eden and successive versions of the pastoral, have structured responses to the natural world from the earliest travel accounts to contemporary popular conservation-speak. Campbell represents a particularly interesting case of this influence in the very way he seemed to rebel against it, in his often contradictory treatments of natural beauty and violence, of wilderness and culture.

Campbell's most important memoir of his youth, *Light on a Dark Horse* (1951), is poised between the earlier effort, *Broken Record* (1934), and the later, even more fabular children's story *The Mamba's Precipice* (1953). It's almost a kind

9 All quotations from Campbell's work are from the 6-volume *Collected Works* [hereafter *CW*], edited by Alexander, Chapman and Leveson.

of comic novel, as fanciful and rambunctious as the Don Quixote he so admired. For the boy Campbell, both his suburban garden and the surrounding sugar-cane fields represented a “Fairy-land”. Simultaneously, as for the nineteenth-century adventurers and hunters from Cumming to Selous, the environment is the arena for muscular adventure, manly risk, and a certain kind of extra-literary authenticity. The wrestle with this “violent Arcadia” Campbell often resolves (or evades) by means of exaggeration, a self-reflective humour, or acid satire.

Unspoken environmental tensions are amplified in the juxtaposition of the “great port” (169) Durban, with “the small sugar-mill” his uncle William Campbell had started. Behind this brief mention the transformation of an entire landscape and society is deftly concealed. Sugar-cane was an industry founded on the forcible expropriation of African lands, sustained by indentured Indian workers, and valorised as the acme of technological progress. Like other commercial agricultures, it entailed the displacement of both indigenous peoples and indigenous wilderness by the monoculture of an alien species. Unruly biodiversity is usurped – tamed – by rectilinear geographies of control and architectures of oversight. One might not guess so from a self-description of the Illovo Sugar Estate of Campbell’s time, in 1925:

The estate is situated in delightful country. A mile or two before the factory is reached, having ascended a high hill, a vast expanse of glorious country greets the eye [...] To the north, west and south, an undulating country with hills in the distance [...] unfolds itself in all its pristine glory, while the Illovo river winds its serpentine course through miles and miles of cane fields. There is cane everywhere. (Cited in Bunn, 41)

As David Bunn points out, this is the rhetoric of the picturesque; the very composition is from Georgian landscape painting. The intention is to persuade the privileged, topographically-elevated viewer that this is a pristine, even self-governing (“unfolds itself”) landscape, a new “Nature”, a recreated Eden. The

mapped invasive *lines* of cane are elided.¹⁰ A different reality underlies the pretty picture. On the Natal sugar estates,

the brutal indentured labour system of the previous decades had [by the twentieth century] been replaced by a less obvious form of exploitation in the form of mills which were [...] “centralised, capitalised, technologically sophisticated, and dependent on free labour”. Labour control and reproduction of the conditions of productions were effected spatially, as well as ideologically, by the form of the *sugar village*, an integrated system that combined worker management, crop machinery surveillance, and ostentatious displays of landowning benevolence. (Bunn, 40)

Similarly, apart from the briefest mentions of Indian workers (usually comical) and African servants (usually “loyal”), the development of this system is all but entirely excluded from Campbell’s account of his childhood days. Indeed, by this time, the cane has virtually *become* the wilderness. Since most truly wild big game has been extirpated, Campbell has to boast about being the first man to “torry” an escaped Indian water-buffalo – a species as foreign as the cane itself. The cane is where snakes lurk, and where as a boy he hunts the bushbuck (200), whose fighting spirit he pumps up to ludicrous levels. Or, with that self-deprecating humour with which Campbell often ameliorates his bloodthirsty vigour, it’s shooting a domestic pig which he mistakes for a wild boar. Everywhere, despite his boyish desire to be *wild* here, the signs of domesticity and commerce have taken over: there are, he admits, only “various patches of forest which have been left in the sugar cane” (201).

10 This approach is neither isolated nor accidental. The following passage describes another view in precisely the same area, precisely a century before:

Nothing could exceed in grandeur the surrounding herbage, and the rich vegetation which *displayed itself* on the whole face of the country. A more charming spot cannot well be imagined. Clear and limpid rivulets, green hills, and clusters of trees studding the whole, attracted our attention on one side; on the other the river Umgani, whose banks exhibited a richness of verdure beyond description beautiful. In the distant ground to which our road led, we could perceive that our course lay over mountains rising gently from the sea, and intersecting our way; and ever and anon, at a distance, the river gliding majestically before us, formed altogether a landscape of no ordinary magnificence. (Isaacs, 108; my italics).

That’s Nathaniel Isaacs, travelling in Natal in 1825. In the very next sentence, Isaacs notes: “The soil appeared to contain properties highly congenial for cultivation”.

So Campbell ranged further afield into the landscapes of the interior. His description of the relatively nearby mountain chain of the Drakensberg interestingly echoes that of the sugar estate quoted above. Here, too, the composition and usage is painterly, though the convention is that of the sublime rather than the picturesque:

[The Drakensberg] ridged above the western skyline some hundred miles away, soaring high above the clouds, and the scenery between was a riot of jagged cobalt and heliotrope rock-ridges, with purple cloud-shadows, and chequered with shaggy black tracts of forest and wattle. It was a sight such as eagles must see every day [...] Above us in the huge vertical Krantzes, baboons were barking. Far down beneath us on a winding kaffir path was a procession of natives, dwarfed by our height to the size of ants (*Horse*, *CW* III, 192-3)

Note the interleaving of the indigenous “forest” and the exotic “wattle” plantation (incidentally repeated in his famous poem “Zulu Girl”). The passage drifts into the imaginative eagle-eye view, and the confluence of elevation and racial identity – a gesture by then so inculcated as to be almost unconscious. And even in this comparatively remote spot, wild nature is not far from human presences.

The exaggerated hunter

In most regions, then, even by the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, most wilderness had been overrun, the animals extirpated. A goodly number had ended up mounted on the walls of sugar-man William Campbell’s Mount Edgecome house. Roy describes it:

The dining room contained about two hundred and fifty heads of different stuffed animals nailed by the scruff to wooden shields. [...] This great dining-room, which may have been a bit of an eyesore to some people, was for me a sort of Fairy-land, especially when the Indian servants festooned it secretly on Christmas Eve as a surprise, with chains of flowers, pine-apples, silver paper, and ribbons, criss-crossing each other from the horns of stuffed koodoos, on one side of the room to the tusks of elephants on

the other side and back to the horns of elands, and sables, and roans, all of whom peered (together with yawning lions and leopards) with glassy eyes, from festoons of flame-tree, flamboyant, bougainvillea, golden shower and syringa – as if to say, “What on earth have we got to do with all this?” (*Horse, CW III*, 173)

A big dining-room, to contain 250 trophy heads, the ghoulish residuum of the direct imposition of British technological rule on the Natal landscape and all its denizens.¹¹ There is a dissonance between the awed child’s and the knowing adult’s perspectives; the historical brutality is literally “festooned”, and metaphorically excused. The momentarily re-vivified heads “speak” in bewilderment at the overlay of this northern-hemisphere, utterly foreign religious ceremonial. The animal heads also symbolise the dissonance within the imperialist enterprise between murderous manly bush adventurism, for which Campbell retains a certain affection, and the advance of metropolitan “civilisation” as embodied in the shop-keeping and intellectualist classes, for which Campbell harboured unreserved disdain. He betrays a covert alignment with the trophy-hunters, only partially defused by that boyishly smiling “by the scruff” and the acknowledgement that for some (read *others*) this room might be an “eyesore”. Behind the discomfiture lies the broader debate, developing at that very time, about the possible roles of Nature, whether wildlife should be eliminated or preserved, the landscape restored or transformed (Kruger National Park was proclaimed in 1926).

Campbell’s predilections want to carry him into the artistically *unconscious*, the spontaneous and intuitive – but arguably fail. On the one hand, he wants to display himself as the gaily risk-taking hunter, the maverick wild man attuned to the natural and the visceral. He wants to revel in unabashed Selous-like violence as a way of distinguishing himself from selected aspects of civilisation, especially from effeminate Romantics, Bloomsbury types, and the “Macspaunday” crowd (MacNeice, Spender, Auden and Day Lewis).¹²

11 Campbell neglects to mention that this same uncle William was closely involved in the establishment of the Hluhluwe-Mfolozi game parks, highlighting the problematic entanglements of elitist hunting interests, human displacement and conservation.

12 In this antinomy, Campbell foreshadows the attitudes of later quasi-military, quasi-Romantic wildlife rangers of this region: what Malcolm Draper describes as the “soft intimacy of hard men” (Draper).

Nowhere is this clearer than in the following early blast, couched in hunting metaphors, from *Wyndham Lewis* (1924):

Even Mr Strachey has been peppered severely (with his own shot-gun) by a disciple who seems to have suspected him of some outstanding quality; all the big game has been “bagged”, but the arms and ammunition, we observe, will now be used (for want of better sport) on the smaller fry by their own species – since it is not in the nature of Bloomsbury to make an attack (unless collectively) on any outstanding man who is capable of defending himself while he is alive. (*CW* III, 18)

On the other hand, Campbell wants – in a manner sometimes so cavalier as to hint at a certain self-conscious nervousness – to show that he is as cultured and learned as anybody. He insists he is not against the intellect in a certain steely form, and is disdainful of the exoticisation of the Savage, the feminine, and the natural, which he lumps casually together: modern literature and philosophy’s “exalting the animal instincts above the mind,” he claims, boils down to “an attempt to identify oneself with the female principle.” He goes on:

The exotic obsession is one of the main channels of the Great Trek from consciousness; it is more than a mere cult: it has become a sort of religion, and forms, with the feminist, child, and nancy movements, the vanguard of the Crusade against the intellect. It is all a suicidal and decadent spasm of anti-white propaganda on the part of sentimentally-politicised whites and their superstitious reverence for the savage. (*CW* III, 29)

One could scarcely be further from Alan James reading //Kabbo.

Campbell wanted to carry none of the assumed burdens of the white man, and he sought something more liberating in the wild, ranging from the Rhodesias to the Carmargue. The Noble Exotic Savage proves not entirely unattractive to him, after all. His defence against sentimentalising this attraction is to refuse to find anything soft or *loveable* in the native, animal or natural worlds. Indeed, he often seems to seek out the least loveable aspects, in order to test himself against them. He was no Deep Ecologist, and his propensity to inflict violence on other creatures (we could list dozens of examples) can get as tedious in its rhetoric as that of his predecessor nineteenth-century hunters. He is not totally without

feeling, but it's a feeling generally born of macho admiration, not empathetic love, as encapsulated in this account of his killing a sable:

After an attempt to charge when I stopped him with my last bullet, he finally sank to his knees, covering himself with his horns with which, like a great batsman, he scornfully deflected the spears and knobkerries of the natives who were with me – I felt a lump rise in my throat, though I was then a more-or-less heartless and trigger-happy urchin of fourteen. (*Horse*, *CW* III, 225)

There has to be some doubt that this ever occurred; possibly Campbell learned something of the art of self-fabulation from his *Voorslag* collaborator Laurens Van der Post, or vice versa. In any event, it is the sportsmanlike scorn in close combat that moves Campbell, not the “glittering, silken” beauty, even though the beauty is noted. The attitude is based on a view of nature as fundamentally rapacious and predatory, and Campbell evidently considered himself as part of that system, shamelessly red in tooth and claw. He wanted communion with it, but not on a “feminine” or romantic basis – not, as he put it, on “the worldwide movement towards ‘otherness,’ a huge wholesale Bergsonian flux which has as its chief unconscious aim the destruction of all vertical contours and distinctions and a return to primitive chaos” (*Wyndham Lewis*, *CW* III, 31). He wanted a clear, even combative hierarchy, based on “male insurgence and egoism” (29).

This propensity does run up against, or mellow into, a countervailing – indeed, more Romantic – one. This is in part to appreciate the natural simply for what it is, as beautiful and fascinating in its own right. Campbell was a close observer. In both *Light on a Dark Horse* and *The Mamba's Precipice* he frequently lapses into quasi-didactic passages about the natural habits and ecology of some or other animal or bird.¹³ This attentiveness should not be under-valued, I think, though at times inaccurate bluster is masked by biological terminology. Geoff Hutchings's warning is apposite: “Campbell was not as intimately acquainted with this landscape as some critics have claimed” (Hutchings, 144). Some of it is book-learning rather than experiential; descriptions are frequently refracted through alarmingly alien literature or art. So, for example, immediately after waging “war” with baboons and effecting a Rider Haggard-like “narrow escape”

13 Van der Post did much the same in his novels, to the detriment of narrative flow.

from a lethal mamba, Campbell enthuses at the “graceful and aristocratic carriage” of kudu bulls which “played and bounded in the sunlight as if they had just sprung forth from the hand of the Maker on the fifth day of Creation”. With similar hyperbole, eland bulls (it is always the bulls) “have a majesty in common with Michelangelo’s *Day*” and recall “Jupiter, when he carried off Europa”. The masculinism is impossible to miss. “I have never been able to bring myself to shoot [an eland],” Campbell adds – and it’s hard to say which emotion is stronger, regret or self-congratulation (*Horse*, *CW* III, 223-5). Art, beauty and predation seem to form an indissoluble nexus in Campbell’s (r)elations with nature:

I am often haunted by the beautiful forms that symbolised those free happy times camping in the veld. Whenever I doodle absent-mindedly, I find the koodoo, eland, sable, waterbuck, impala and bushbuck nostalgically bounding on to the paper from the old index-finger, whose trigger has now become a pen. The hardest to draw of all these beautiful animals, and the hardest to shoot, both on account of its ineffable grace and its agility, is the impala. It is known as the “springbok of the low-veld”, not so much because of any physical resemblance, but on account of its prodigious powers of jumping; these excel even those of the springbok. One of the loveliest sights imaginable is the reddish-golden arc formed by the bodies of a herd of impala as they leap over a stream or (so as not to leave any tell-tale spoor) over a wide waggon-road. (*Horse*, *CW* III, 224)

“Absent-mindedly”; “nostalgically”; “imaginable”. In those three words lies a good deal of Campbell’s mind-of-nature: an affectation of pre-rational communion with a dramatic, “natural” but largely imaginary past in whose destruction – symbolised by the waggon-road – he himself seems almost unwittingly to participate. That this is a blind spot of sorts is indicated by another passage from *Light on a Dark Horse*, which is suffused with the language of admirable violence even though it’s not about creatures he would even dream of shooting, Carmine bee-eaters attending a bush-fire:

The roses that fell from the sky on the day of the canonisation of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux can scarcely have excelled these birds in colour, because, with the almost level rays striking them at a great altitude, they seemed to outshine the most wonderful of flowers, as much as most flowers

outshine their leaves. The flames were now crackling on the long grass and palmettos, and sending up an inverted cataract of sparks and black smoke, filled with scorched and stupefied insects. Then, from the height of about a hundred and fifty feet, the birds all simultaneously inclined their flight and *swooped like dive-bombers*, hurling their seraphic streaks of ruby and sapphire at the curtain of smoke and flame, *striking* through which, they seemed to *ricochet* at a steep angle to the same height on the other side, where they revolved, without pausing, in their own length, and repeated the process. They could have *hawked* an equal number of escaping insects outside the *zone of fire*: but they obviously took a real *delight in the danger*, and in matching their own solar flames against the plumes of the conflagration [. T]he bee-eaters' feathers, all streamlined so smoothly backward, and insulated by their speed, afforded no more purchase for the tiniest spark, or grain of smut, than a *hard-nosed bullet spinning forward from the clean grooves of a rifle-barrel*. (*Horse*, *CW* III, 260; my emphases)

The beauty notwithstanding, this is still about predation. As with the dying sable, it's their "skill, and courage" he really admires. Notice also the oddly religious introduction, doubtless a spin-off of his conversion to Catholicism. Its insertion here raises troubling questions about the relationships between his faith, his flirtations with fascism, and his predatory atavism – all, perhaps, indicative of, or emanating from, a psychology which was fundamentally pugnacious. Which perhaps explains nothing.

The point is that Campbell, his vivid and often beautiful quality of observation notwithstanding, evinces a vision of the natural based more on Darwinian "survival of the fittest" (in its misused meaning of "toughest" rather than "most suited to weather prevailing conditions", as its originator, Herbert Spencer, intended it) than on happy symbiosis. And this was despite a kind of primitivist urge to be unified with it. Further, in almost its every expression, Campbell's descriptions of the natural intersect complexly but inextricably with his attitudes towards the human societal relationships in his life.

The politics of ecology

Campbell was not unconscious of the deleterious impact of hunting and other human activities on a notionally pristine Africa. While we obviously can't

expect Campbell to think in an ecological mode as informed by later twentieth-century scientific perspectives, one does encounter in his work the occasional articulation of natural interrelationships for which the term “ecological” seems appropriate. This description of western Natal, for instance, “the most beautiful country imaginable”:

Unlike the tropical coast, it is temperate, and even cold. All the fruits of Northern Europe grow there as well as they grow in England, and the altitude ranges from three to five thousand feet. There are great precipitous forest-crowned ranges such as the Kaarkloof where delicious clear springs cascade down through rocks covered with moss, maiden-hair, and other ferns. Tree-ferns, orchids, and bush lilies grow under the huge lichen-covered stems of yellowwoods, umkuthlas, and other giants of the forest. The stream-beds are moraines of mossy boulders populated with thousands of hyraxes, or “rock-rabbits” as we call them. Where the streams emerge from the forest highlands into the open, they go winding through groves of European weeping-willows and are often full of trout imported from England and America, which flourish in our mountain rivers and streams. (*Horse*, *CW* III, 217)

This is fairly closely observant of an ecosystem, albeit not scientifically informed of its inner workings. A certain Georgian voyeurism is still evident in some of Campbell’s “imported” vocabulary (“moraines”, “groves”), which nudges up, just like the alien species, against the indigenous (“umkuthlas”). Note the phrase “as we call them”, a common quirk of Campbell’s: despite having been largely absent from South Africa when he came to write this, he is still thinking of himself as the distinct, alienated-yet-emplaced colonial, bearer of an unruly anti-metropolitan code and vocabulary. If there is no real awareness here of the ecological implications of imported aliens, there is nevertheless some basis for a critique of Northern “civilisation”. Without his experiences of the South African bush – and without his re-imagining of those experiences – nothing else in Campbell’s literary or political sensibility would have developed the way it did. I would go so far as to say that his view of Nature – and of a robust if intellectualised version of the Rousseauesque Savage-in-Nature – is foundational to his stance. This is implicit in a well-known passage which, as his biographer Joseph Pearce rightly notes, “still resonates with ecological foreboding more than half a century later” (Pearce, 292):

Evolution came to be regarded (especially here in the home of its chief preachers) as an automatic process of amelioration functioning for the benefit of mankind in general and Britain in particular. The orgy of irresponsible innovations and inventions – which originating as a sort of drunken procession of detribalised nomads, without a spiritual home or destination, or even a roadway in the shape of a tradition, now threatens to become a Gadarene stampede of headlong and irresistible impetus – was regarded as something beneficial and called “progress”, which it certainly *is*, being downhill and completely without brakes: the most rapid and disastrous “progress” ever witnessed. (*CW* IV, 246)

Hence Campbell claims to eschew the use of machines to assert his individualistic power. This even extends to firearms, despite having wielded guns himself with such relish in his youth. He sneers:

It always surprises me to hear English people decrying the bullfight as being cruel, when they hunt defenceless foxes with packs of dogs [...] at no personal risk.

Any pot-bellied draper who has made a fortune, can arm himself with a rifle (an invincible weapon against any animal) and go out and “bag” his elephant, lion, tiger, rhino, then he returns a hero with a few photographs in the gossip-column. I have never yet heard of one of these heroes trying to win distinction inside the barricades. That may be the reason why the corridas are so hated and decried by this type of Tartarin. Lord Dash and Lady Blank can go off and wound fifty antelopes which, escaping, die in agony after several days. But the priests of Mithras, who are forced to put their victims to death from the most perilous position [...] with the horns of the bull an inch off their entrails, are considered to be cruel and barbarous. (*Taurine Provence*, *CW* III, 48-9)

Technology muffled proximity to “personal risk”. For Campbell, this proximity was all, and if he could not experience it, he would make it up. His daughter Anne noted his aversion even to typewriters and cars: “People pointed out that without the tractor, for instance, you could never feed the population of the world, to which he answered, ‘You are putting the cart before the horse, it is only since the Industrial Revolution that the world has become over-crowded’” (quoted

in Pearce, 166). That he saw population pressure as an ecological problem is undeniable: "If the population of the world goes on increasing in proportion to soil-erosion, the ultimate diet of the world will have to be plankton, sea-weed and octopus," he wrote in *Portugal* (1957; *CW* IV, 59). But environmental insight was tainted with something more vicious, dislocated and, despite itself, alienating: "I hate 'Humanity' and all such abstracts," he fulminated in *Light on a Dark Horse*, "but I love *people*. Lovers of 'Humanity' generally hate *people and children*, and keep parrots or puppy dogs" (*Horse*, *CW* III, 293; his emphases).

What he meant, presumably, was that he liked a certain *kind* of people, and certain kinds of animal-human relationships. He was averse to any philosophy of "amelioration"; despite his stated disdain for Nietzsche in some documents, there is a Nietzschean strain in the individualistic, quasi-aristocratic will-to-power which seems to be Campbell's alternative ideal. This is explicit in an apparently unconsciously satirical passage from "Fetish Worship in South Africa", published in *Voorslag* in 1926. Campbell identifies with the face of an old man from a "very old South African family":

This is a fine old bull Wildebeeste[. He] is self-contained and sufficient. He never goes about trying to inflict his language, his point of view, or the laws of his existence on anybody else. He never has a grievance, he never whines for protection or tries to restrict anybody else's liberty. He doesn't grumble or talk politics. If you try to make him swot up English or Afrikaans he simply kicks up his heels and scampers off. Whenever he wants to say anything he says "Kngrrarhr!" He always says the same thing, like a politician, but he doesn't contradict himself and he is more concise. He hasn't got any colour-prejudice or race-feeling. He doesn't care a hang for fences, taboos and restrictions, he just bounces gracefully over them, but he doesn't entangle himself with them or try to break them. He just sails over them and lands the other side. He is one of the few individualists in this country [...] He is about the only creature in South Africa who has any vestige of aristocracy or breeding about him. He is a true Nietzschean (*CW* IV, 211)

No passage is more revealing of Campbell's desires for himself; if he often failed to achieve them, perhaps in that very failure lies his contradictoriness. As he adds, the Wildebeeste's "outlook is scientific and artistic": antitheses lurk there which Campbell never resolves. What's important here, however, is the way

in which he uses observed African nature as a lever against the targets of his vitriol. We will see this again in the poems. “At heart I’m a complete anarchist,” he confessed in an unguarded moment (quoted in Pearce, 281). His political affiliations were opportunistic, so that he could in one phase adulate Hitler as a “civilised and human adversary” – more because he was simply an *adversary* than because of anything he represented (225) – and in another phase disdain the “Utopian blarney of the Red” (*Flowering Rifle*, *CW* II, 504). In the end he could crush everything he despised into a single, incoherent portmanteau term, “Fascidemokshevism” (Pearce, 253).

Perhaps the only consistency beneath all this is an essentially pathological combativeness, one that is based on a particular view of Nature and of the rightful human position within it. Thus Campbell would vilify modern Western society repeatedly because of its *loving* treatment of other creatures like “puppy-dogs and monkeys”. Sentimentality was, for Campbell, *unnatural*:

The most vulgar and degrading spirit which is active in modern life is that bastard of decadent Protestantism which expresses itself vicariously sometimes as humanitarianism, as socialism, as Fabianism, as “sportsmanship”, or as vegetarianism – to which the vegetable kingdom replies scornfully with carnivorous plants, man-eating trees, and deadly poisons. (Quoted in Pearce, 49)

Man-eating *trees*? One does not have to disagree with the recognition that Western imperialism has been the world’s most environmentally rapacious society ever unleashed, to find Campbell’s formulations skewed and hyperbolic.

The essential point is this: Campbell’s ecology is the fountainhead of his satire, even of his sense of identity. With this in mind, we can now turn to some of his poetry.

Terrapins and cobras

In some ways, a lingering Romanticism fed Campbell’s satirical attacks on effete and effeminate shopkeepers and literati. This was despite his early efforts to shed Romantic notions of communion-with-Nature. As young poets will, he practiced with the latter in his juvenile verse: “My raptured soul dissolves, and eddies swift/ Into the mystic oceans of eternity” (*CW* II, 25). But he rapidly replaced this derivative vacuity with a vigour more faithful to his true nature:

The trees, stuffed full of shadow, held the foul
 Mist up like rags, and on the savage air
 Shook forth no bat to harp the gale. The owl
 Glared ember-eyed out of their drab despair. ("Canal", *CWII*, 29)

Still beholden to Baudelaire, to be sure, and remote from a world he actually knew, but hinting at the more Modernist poetic power to come. The antagonism of the "ember-eyed" owl goes with a rejection of what Campbell saw as the Romantics' unreal and "centrifugal" nature-worship:

Even those more joyously bouncing poets who exult in being "one with nature" and tell us that "life" is good and real, and earnest, are in the same position – their comments come from outside. If not to interned aliens, they can be compared to enraptured tourists in a foreign country who have to pinch themselves, when confronted with reality, to see if they are awake or dreaming [...] "So this is really nature and I am here – *in* Nature, and a part of life itself. How marvellous!" [...] The streak of philistinism that runs through Wordsworth is entirely traceable to the same external attitude. All his poetry is an attempt to establish a contact between the natural, visible world and the mental fatherland which he describes in his Ode on the Intimations [*sic*]: it was that fatherland where he really dwelt. (*Wyndham Lewis, CWIII*, 21)

By contrast, Campbell valorises Wyndham Lewis for his "world of vivid ideas, hard contours, and momentous impacts" (22). The very vigour of Campbell's attack on the Romantics and Georgians betrays, perhaps, an anxiety that he was himself prone to the same temptations, that he had not made the "momentous impact" he had hoped, and that he could never quite live up to those hard and vertical contours. His own romantic needs in fact surface repeatedly, notably in *The Flaming Terrapin*, a poem which in its very incoherence and its tumultuous heraldic symbolisms, exemplifies much of Campbell's character. Pieter Williams delightfully summarises the poem:

The terrapin's mighty voice galvanizes Samson into action to deal with a North American "grumbling bear", Indian lion and tiger, and an assortment of African animals in their natural habitats, which animals,

while he is still swinging, mauling, ripping, rending and driving, suddenly transmogrify into metaphorical vices and political personifications in a cavalcade of sound and fury, perhaps signifying something. (Williams, 120)

The following passage is symptomatic:

Thence into livelier forms his vigour swims
 In fluid grace to beautify the limbs
 Or swift wild creatures pasturing in herds,
 Through whose lithe bodies, as they graze the plain,
 It flows like music – soaping into curds
 Of froth along the Kudu’s gusty mane,
 And slithering in the muscles of the Roan,
 And in great Buffaloes, loading with stone
 Their horny brows, as with resounding stride
 And battering force, in one fierce shock that pulls
 The screaming turf, up their huge forms collide
 And thunder clothes the battle-angry bulls!
 Feeding a myriad forms with life and light,
 Speed for the race, and courage for the fight,
 And Man, triumphant, feels their strength and speed
 Thrill though his frame as music through a reed. (*CW* II, 60-61)

In this extraordinary trajectory from fluid pastoral peace to “screaming turf” to “triumphant” *human* power, and the incongruously fragile “music through a reed”, we observe again Campbell’s contradictory egoism. The need to glean strength from the Nature he claims to know so well wars with an anxiety about the anti-social implications of his own combativeness. He wants to banish the “bookish Muses” whose “dead lava crawled with wrinkled epics” (63), and to discover instead, or create, a new “lyre of savage thunder”, a “Muse of the Berg” “nourished on sunlight in a world of stone”. But this very formulation, and lines like the next one – “Where old Zambezi shakes his hoary locks” – reveal his lingering indebtedness to the very poetic traditions he’s trying to transcend (49). Where he does make the break, where the image is most arrestingly fresh, is when direct observation of African wildlife surfaces: the springboks “hooping their spines on the gaunt karroo” (58), the “Great aasvogels” veering “like

beetles on a pond" (61), or

Huge grizzled bats, so aged and so thin
That, as with fruit parched in its wrinkled skin,
About the shrunk pulp of their bodies clung
A loose grey pouch of fur, and as they swung,
Like pennies in a beggar's greasy purse
Their dry bones jingled (44)

"Shrunk pulp": brilliant. And where the arch allegory bites, it bites because of its conjunction with real observed *African* Nature: life is "a scorpion with tenacious hold" (44); oppression is "like a starved hyena" alongside the "livid mambas of deceit" (36); and "like a skinny cockroach, the faint moon/ Crawls on their tattered blanket" (42). This reads even today as a novel recharging of the language, a voltage energising it beyond the contrivances of Miltonic metre or a Blake-like use of animals as heraldic emblems: "As a fierce train, maned like a ramping lion /With smoke and fire" (55), for example. *The Flaming Terrapin* in a number of ways – from its central animal "protagonist" on – confirms the indivisible relationship between Campbell's vision of Nature and his vision of himself:

This sudden strength that catches up men's souls
And rears them up like giants in the sky,
Giving them fins where the dark ocean rolls,
And wings of eagles when the whirlwinds fly,
Stands visible to me in its true self
(No spiritual essence or winged elf
Like Ariel on the empty winds to spin).
I see him as a mighty Terrapin (34)

Of course, the Terrapin is no less *imagined* – no more convincingly an image of the "true self" – than Ariel is, and is arguably undermined by its own absurdity. Here is the core of Campbell's anxiety. The opening image of the above passage is echoed in the conclusion to this garbled, frenetic, egoistic would-be-epic – but only after another spasm of longing for the peaceful pastoral:

The murderer has wiped his grisly sword,
 The rusty carbine trembles in his fist;
 The trigger turns into a golden pin,
 The barrel swings, a lily tall and frail,
 And the dark soul, forgetful of his sin,
 Walks singing through the terrors of the gale.
 Under the feet of pale somnambulists
 The thorns are turned to flowers gold and white:
 Roses for those sad haunters of the mists
 Flame in the secret gardens of the night.
 Where each young Hercules, tired of the chase,
 Has lain, the earth becomes a mass of flowers.
 His pleated muscles and his burning face
 Are sweeter to the earth than April showers,
 And where he slept the flaming corn aspires
 To harp the wind along on golden wires. (61)

The pastoralism is tinny, though, too glib in places, riven with unspoken doubt. It is unaccountably “sad”. In the passage above, it’s the “pleated muscles” which really interest Campbell, and the power of the slumbrous Hercules out of which the vigorously “flaming” corn grows again. It is a herculean figure who delivers the conclusion’s “silent chanting of the soul”:

“Though times shall change and stormy ages roll,
 I am that ancient hunter of the plains
 That raked the shaggy flitches of the Bison:
 Pass, world: I am the dreamer that remains,
 The Man, clear-cut against the last horizon!” (63)

In that Yeatsian gesture of dismissal, the hunter remains after all.¹⁴ The hunter is also the dreamer – and perhaps the hunt itself is a dream. No matter: it is the dream that makes the man. Into images of this ancient rural power (sometimes explicitly African) Campbell projects himself, as he does in “Rounding the Cape”, “Zulu Girl”, and “The Serf”.

That this projection is a way to whip himself up to the posture of action is

14 Though that “Pass, world” predates W B Yeats’s “Horseman, pass by” by some fifteen years.

expressed more openly in “The Making of a Poet”. In this poem, he is the “restive steer”, a maverick persecuted by the “old bulls”:

Lost in the night he hears the jungles crash
 And desperately, lest his courage fail,
 Across his hollow flanks with sounding lash
 Scourges the heavy whipcord of his tail. (*CW* II, 125)

This characteristic evocation of the buffalo – with its connotations for Campbell simultaneously of the wild, of the toreador, the vaquero, the equestrian¹⁵ – is his way to poetically “slam the door” against the pastoral tinsel of the Georgians whose “thousand meek soprano voices carol/ The loves of homosexuals or plants” (“Georgian Spring”, *CW* II, 118). This conjunction of sexual anxiety, fear of weakness, and derision of a beneficent idea of Nature, drives the rhythmically proficient but in the end tediously vitriolic outpouring of *The Georgiad* (*CW* II, 179-217). This poem is littered with natural and animal imagery; most of it is heraldic, European and detached from the real, but specifically African motifs are still occasionally used, with some force. The Georgians are themselves, Campbell implies, a “never-ending throng/ Of all the bow-wows, poodles, tykes and curs/ That Georgian poets ever hymned in verse” (189). This “Mediocrity, beneath whose spell/ Lion and fox as loving neighbours dwell” (193) is capable of domesticating even Africa’s wild denizens into dispirited specimens in a kind of mental zoo:

Here orioles and rollers shun the view
 And trogons love to moult the whole year through,
 While if the red flamingos seem to flame,
 It’s only that they’re blushing out of shame.
 Here social eagles, chattering in flocks,
 Have quit their lonely eyries on the rocks
 For farmyard barns, the synagogues of owls,
 And hutches whitened by the dung of fowls [...]
 On gouty feet here limps the slow gazelle [...]
 All creatures here the laws of God forswear –

15 This equestrian aspect of Campbell’s use of the natural I do not cover here, since it has been explored by Butler at least (Butler, 132-146). It’s worth just noting Campbell’s mystifying statement that “Africa is fundamentally equestrian” (*Broken Record*; quoted in Butler, 143).

This wistful lion and the bleating bear (194)

These icons of pride, power and beauty are reduced to the trophies we encountered earlier in this chapter:

Where Mr Georgiana, plump and hale,
 Sat basking (while some deep dispute he carried on)
 In the reflected glory of his harridan:
 While from his temples spirally outspread
 The bovine trophies never to be shed
 And, like the royal Kudu's, proudly rolled,
 High overhead, their rugged wheels of gold,
 A high record for Rowland Ward¹⁶ to stuff
 And on a varnished shield to nail the scruff,
 Seventy-seven inches on the curve –
 There's no such head in Mweru reserve!
 Even the devil dwindles to a duiker (211)

Against this disingenuous trophy-ism Campbell levels the power of untrammelled Nature in all its ambivalent beauty. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in one of his best-loved poems, "The Zebras". A diction of pollinated pastoralism is riven with a modernist energy ("electric", "volted"), to end, characteristically, with an African reprise of the rape of Europa: the stallion, "engine of beauty", possessively rolls "*his* mare among the trampled lilies" (*CWII*, 148; my emphasis) – a masculinism of power that one doesn't have to be an ecofeminist to find deeply discomfiting today. It also serves to remind us that Romanticism in the imperial context, while superficially admirable, was still an invasive ideology,

a literary ideology by means of which those who were exotics, colonisers, attempted to make themselves indigenous, or, this failing, to obscure from themselves the fact of their continuing foreign-ness. If the ideology did not operate as a form of social critique, it nevertheless served to draw what was African into a European mental orbit and domesticate it there. [...] Characteristically, it strove to overcome this [alienation] by means of a

16 Rowland Ward was the hunter and collector who established the famous record-lists for hunters' trophies world-wide.

“projection of consciousness into the alien: into the African himself, into the African fauna or landscape” (J M Coetzee, quoted in Watson, 60)

The very diction is another way of getting at the Georgian and Romantic vacuity Campbell attacks in “Poets in Africa”. The inherited tropes, Campbell implies in this poem, are a “pox of flowers”, an “annual eczema”. In Africa, however, one is confronted by the “tarantulas of truth”:

Far in the desert¹⁷ we have been
Where Nature, still to poets kind,
Admits no vegetable green
To soften the determined mind. (*CW* II, 145-6)

Which distress, according to Campbell, is all to the good. His determination is to leave behind the “glutinous syrup” of Romantic moonlight, the “old grey wolf of Brother-love”, the “Green fossils of Omnipotence”, and instead embrace the “red alluvium of strife”, the martyrdom of the porcupine in his “fiendish war-paint”:

True sons of Africa are we,
Though bastardized with culture,
Indigenous, and wild, and free,
As wolf, as pioneer and vulture –
[...]
We shall grow terrible through fear,
We shall grow venomous with truth (146)

Yet it’s hard to see just what this truth is, or where Campbell expects it to lead him. Stephen Watson’s observation is just: Campbell’s “poetic intercourse with Africa is really a monologue spoken from the heights of that personal isolation that drove him into exile and egocentricity [...] only a means of serving his own therapeutic purposes” (Watson, 62).

This is also implicit in his satires on English pastoralism, “An Anatomy of the Veld” and “A Veld Eclogue” (*CW* II, 113-116). The emptiness of terrain

17 This phrase is an obvious swipe at Thomas Pringle’s poem “Afar in the desert”, no less deserving of scorn than the British Romantics, in Campbell’s view.

depicted here is a startlingly far cry from the rich if frequently murderous pleasure Campbell displays in the African bush in his prose works. If this contradiction shows nothing else, it is the truism that “Nature” is itself largely a construct, an emanation of the psyche. It really is, in essence, “nameless”, as Campbell says in this poem, less satirically than we might initially suppose – or even than he supposed himself. Campbell *creates* the relationships he needs; the desert is not a desert in and of itself, but an image of ignorance, neglect, rejection, to which the only solution is what Blake called “severe contentions of friendship”. Campbell seeks the symbolic strength he needs in horses, bulls, lions, mambas – in a cobra.

“To a Pet Cobra” (*CW* II, 130-131) is perhaps the finest of his African animal-centred poems, singularly revealing of the dynamics we have touched on throughout this chapter. The poet is “lonely”, spurned by the “inadvertent heel” of his “dull nation”; he and the cobra together have been “starved” into being. But “There is no sea so wide, no waste so steril [*sic*]/ But holds a rapture for the sons of strife”. He will take on the powers of the cobra whose lethal dry slide on his bare arm he loves, precisely for its danger: he too will become “venomous with truth”. A “strenuous line” of poetry might carry the force of the snake’s “resilient spine”; with it he might (in another subversion of the flowery diffuseness of the Georgians) “sting these rotted wastes into a flower”.

I’m not convinced Campbell ever arrived at a clear conception of what that “flower” was. His view of man-in-Nature was such that he was never likely to arrive at a sense of a settled whole. As he put it in his squib about general-turned-philosopher Jan Smuts, “Holism” (*CW* II, 174):

The love of Nature burning in his heart,
Our new Saint Francis offers us his book –
The saint who fed the birds at Bondelswaart
And fattened up the vultures at Bull Hoek.

The rooting of Campbell’s vision in the specifics of South African history, landscape and nature is also central to the fragment, written with William Plomer in 1926, “Solo and Chorus from “The Conquistador”” (*CW* II, 122-3). It’s not a successful poem (the Solo and Chorus don’t seem to be in coherent antiphony), but it encapsulates many of our themes here, and will allow us to end on a suitably ecological note. In this portrayal of human plunder of the earth –

mineral, vegetable, and animal alike – a genuinely ecological vision is evident, albeit without the moral thrust of today’s environmentalism. In the poem, the very rocks are consumed by miners: “O bake us the red, the blue,/ The boulders of the broad Karroo”. The Solo calls for an ascent from the plains of “bitter grass” and “harsh stems”: “Come quit these pastures for the peaks/ Before we devastate the world”. The Chorus expresses a desire to stay “while so green a salad fills/ The blue bowl of the circling hills”. The peaks sound no better: there the “free” are roasted on spits, as are even the phoenix and “angel’s eggs”. Even myth is eaten in this rotted waste. On the plains, famine threatens, as a result of trying to “pacify the brutes”, and the Chorus laments: “No more these rolling plains, O chief/ Shall thunder under tons of beef”. The result seems to be either racial war, with “Maxim guns” following the “sanguinary drums”, or, if that fails (Heaven forbid!), Diplomacy. There seems no escape. The muddled fragment ends on a verse suffused with indeterminate cynicism as well as a hopeful but directionless energy symbolised by another clutch of animal images. It seems to be a simultaneous revelling in and despair at the conjunction, or collusion, of institutional human society and predatory Nature:

Then fly, my wolf-pack, on before,
 Swift in your pilgrimage of hope,
 And I shall follow on your spoor
 To kiss the bunions of the Pope:
 A thousand priests, behind our thunder,
 Shall follow with the crow and kite,
 To cure the wounds of those we plunder
 With words of mercy, hope and light!



Chapter Three

N H Brettell's diffident apocalypse

Is it possible to love Nature without some sense of the sacred? Is appreciation of the beauty of the natural intrinsically sacralising, even if not couched in religious terms? Is appreciation or love merely a way of avoiding or cushioning our consciousness of the predatory and indifferent side of the natural, our suspicion that we are no greater than any other organism whose brief life snuffs out, never to be resurrected into higher meaning? Or can we live with the two strands, the beauty and the void, simultaneous and intertwined, even energising one another? What articulation with such an ambiguous awareness can poetry have?

These are, I think, the questions raised by the poetry of N H Brettell. Douglas Livingstone called Brettell “the undoubted giant of poetry in Southern Africa, and probably this continent”. I would consider that an exaggeration, more applicable perhaps to Livingstone himself, but he was a fine poet. For his part Brettell, dedicating his poem “Epiphany 1965” to Livingstone, wrote of grappling with “a young man’s difficult poetry”, sensing there a “magus gift of casual potency”. Assuming that he’s referring to Livingstone’s work itself, we sense the older man, with “gnarled, clenched, cold” hands, wrestling with more modernist modes. (He would have been 57, Livingstone 33.) One day, he hopes, his “craven brain”, haunted by “the styptics of dismay” and “tatters of distrust”, as if by “nightadder and bat”, will emerge like a mole into “intolerable light”, and he will “bring back the gold” (in Hacksley, “Brettell” I, 241).¹⁸ Encapsulated here are Brettell’s signature meld of the bookish and the natural, his attachment to conservative stanzaic forms, above all his self-deprecating diffidence.

Noel Harry Brettell was born in Lye, Worcestershire, in July 1908, and

18 Although in what follows I will refer mostly to the Snailpress edition of Brettell’s *Selected Poems*, Gregory Hacksley’s PhD, a 2-volume variorum compilation and comprehensive commentary, “The Poems of N H Brettell”, contains a wealth of poems otherwise unpublished or obscure – a vital resource.

received a first-class Honours degree in English, with a strong side-dish of Latin, from Birmingham University. An education powered by Shakespeare and the Roman classics would structure much of his poetry. He answered an advertisement for a teaching post at Ruzawi, Rhodesia, in 1930, where he met his future wife, Eva Scovell. He spent a short time back in England, before returning to Rhodesia and teaching in several schools until 1958. His first volume of poems, *Bronze Frieze*, was published in 1950. When his last school closed, the Brettells retired to a cottage they built in the Nyanga (formerly Inyanga) highlands. Though a “natural hermit”, in fellow-poet D E Borrell’s words, he worked gratis in numerous ways to support the nearby Bonda Mission station. A second volume of poems, *Season & Pretext*, was published in 1977. In 1979 the guerrilla war caught up with the couple; they were attacked and the cottage reduced to ruins by rocket fire. They survived unhurt, but moved to the small Midlands town of Gatooma (Kadoma), where Brettell completed his autobiography *Side-Gate and Stile*, published by Books of Rhodesia in 1981 – to my mind still the finest of white Rhodesian memoirs. Eva’s death prompted some of Brettell’s most poignant elegies; he himself died in November 1991, leaving a son and a daughter. He is best memorialised, perhaps, by the *Selected Poems*, edited by Hugh Finn with the help of Livingstone, and published by Snailpress in 1994.

“I suppose,” Brettell wrote in *Side-gate and Stile*, “the truth is that Nature is so supremely neutral and indifferent to both our distress and ecstasy that our only logical response ought to be a similar indifference [...] an impersonal shrug of the shoulders. But without anger at her heartlessness, can you really discover Earth’s rapture?” (163-4). He wrote this in “October”, one segment of a sort of survey of the unfolding seasons and months of the Zimbabwean climate. We always called October “suicide month”, the most brutal time of the year, locked between the end of the dry season and the first overpowering heat of summer.

Behind the wild veils of thwarted rain, incredibly beautiful and incalculably remote, the plumes of cirrus covered the depths of blue with arabesques of silk and lawn: dry air in the high sky that meant no rain for days. Every rock in our whole circumference of hills glittered hard and gem-like in the austere light, and across one pinnacle, the last shred of a rainbow threw down the promise that we should not be drowned tomorrow. It was such a sky of torn and tormented beauty that one may only see once in a lifetime; and how I cursed it. (163)

To this fierce and internally fractured lyricism, he adds: “Fear and worship walk very close together” (163) – and he describes the vertiginous sensation of peering over the lip of Mtarazi waterfall. I will return to waterfalls a little later, but we can linger on Brettell’s response to the Nyanga topography of tumbled mountains, the silvery granite batholiths he loved to represent in his competent watercolours, scored deep with ravines and knots of forest. It was utterly different from anything England could offer, though he tried sometimes to reconcile them, naming a local crag “Mother Dunch’s Buttocks”, after a poem by Edward Thomas, whom he admired. He noted that the gentler highveld, with its luxurious soils, could “foster an English transplant; but exotic birds and beasts, nameless flowers and trees with an alien name, a people aloof and inscrutable, a climate bland but fickle and sometimes cruel” (130) – these challenged settlement and poetics alike, the more so in Nyanga’s spectacularly daunting terrain. In the following passage Brettell echoes William Blake’s aphorism from the *Proverbs of Hell*, “Where Man is not, Nature is barren”:

It has been said that Nature in Africa to the white man is inimical, that her symbol is not a flower in a crannied wall, but, in William Plomer’s startling image, “heraldic in the heat, a scorpion on a stone”. It is a matter of attitude. [...] Whether Nature, Housman’s “heartless, witless Nature”, is benign or malignant, it is our thinking makes it so. The springs of ‘nature poetry’, and its distillation into mysticism and pantheism, may well be a delusion, but the emotions it disturbs are authentic enough. If I walk to church the three miles from my home, I can either climb up a gable of hillside that takes me aloft into the morning wind and a step nearer the sky, or through a narrow kloof where sheer walls of granite close in a strip of sky that seems immeasurably unattainable. The one elates and the other abases, and both moods may be imaginary but are undeniably real. If the changing effect of nature on the human spirit did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it. (131)

We do not have to invent it. Brettell’s articulation of the relationship between the imaginary and the real is key, and it coheres with his sense of the place and power of poetics. He wrote: “The argument as to what makes poetry will doubtless go on, but a simple fact about it is that it is an artefact, a collage of words that capture, often imperfectly, sometimes miraculously, always desperately,

memories glimpsed or heard reverberating down these endless perspectives of the mind” (10). What he divines as imperfect and even desperate – not unusual in poets, of course – is integral to his humility and self-deprecation. He described himself as “one who has become a poet, albeit an unimportant one, a tardy, reluctant, indolent one, a second self whose growth was curiously diffident and retarded. [...] I had at last, tardily and diffidently, found my way to a sort of verse that satisfied me [...] founded on the past and enlivened by the random reading of isolation” (112).

Perhaps that very “diffidence” shackled Brettell to his poetic lineage more closely than his talent deserved. John Eppel once told me that he liked poetry that surprised, and that Brettell’s did not. There is something in that. Poetry comes out of other poetry, and Brettell’s arose from that “random reading”: Shakespeare, Housman, Herbert, Catullus, Edward Thomas, and Edmund Blunden, whom he credited with coaxing him into publishing. (There is an educated conservatism in these choices, not *that* random.) He recounted his grappling with the perennial dialogue between inherited form and the attainment of a distinctively personal style. He balked at D H Lawrence’s unstructured line, “free and glowering as flowing lava”, wondering if it could suit him any more than simply chopping up mellifluous prose into arbitrary lines. English-language poetry needed form, rhyme in particular. This, in his view, is intrinsic to the craftsmanship of poetry, independent of the poet’s ideological stance or physical environs. He alludes to Philip Sidney: “A man might argue himself into being a Christian, a socialist or even a vegetarian or a white African: he has never argued himself into being a poet” (131). Eppel, as we will see, practices an analogous, if less constrained, devotion to such craftsmanship of form – not to mention the ambivalences of being a white man in Africa.

Other conventions, including the aesthetics of landscape, also exert their pressure. At least from the time of Thomas Pringle, a question has been raised about whether the relationship between an imported, Anglophone verbal manifold and the unique terrains of Africa can ever be “authentic”. This is, I believe, a politically motivated question rather than one of poetics, difficult though those realms may be to disentangle. Brettell was alert to the issue, writing in an unpublished 1979 manuscript:

I have attempted in my verse to resolve the contradictions and dilemmas of a man born and educated in England, but whose life has been spent in

Africa, and to whom regret for the one has sharpened awareness of the other. [...] I cannot agree with those critics who demand that our poetry have an ‘African’ content and decry any that does not. A poem is simply the thing a poet writes – at any time, anywhere. (In Hacksley, “Brettell” I, xvii)

I’m sympathetic to that, even if it feels a touch evasive. Can Brettell avoid writing as “naturalist, tourist or rambler” – or is he doomed to repeat some of the faults or problems he perceives in predecessor colonial poets?

A poet on poets

Another way of gauging the tenor of Brettell’s poetry is to attend to his evaluation of earlier “Rhodesian” poets. The energetic publisher of the Books of Rhodesia series, Louis Bolze, persuaded Brettell to write an introduction to his 1974 reprint of the poems of the youthful Rhodesian sojourner Kingsley Fairbridge. There Brettell notes that, at his tender age, Fairbridge was unlikely to invent a new mode for this new African territory, remaining overly indebted in technique and diction to Kipling, Arnold and Longfellow. Like Longfellow in “Hiawatha” – and not unlike Alan James “versioning” //Kabbo – Fairbridge also produced “translations” of local folk tales and first-person narratives by African characters. In these he does, in Brettell’s view, achieve “the combination of a civilised and sophisticated medium with barbaric incident and imagery” (v). That dichotomy of “civilised” and “barbaric” sits poorly now, and I think actually does an injustice to the ambivalences latent in Fairbridge’s slender oeuvre. It does, however, resonate with Fairbridge’s portrayal of the wild – “the garrulous baboon, the slinking hyena, the leopard of the yellow eyes” (iv) – and it ramifies into Brettell’s own animal portraits. Brettell concludes that Fairbridge, for all his jejune narrowness, limited by the strictures of his time and situation, “did have communion with the ‘genius loci’ of the place”. He empathises with Fairbridge when he takes his blankets out to lie among the “long grasses. There is no kinder ceiling than the sky, no finer philosopher than the darkling night” (vi).

Brettell makes a more substantial poetic evaluation of Arthur Shearly Cripps’s poems. In *Side-Gate and Stile* Brettell devotes a chapter to the “eccentric, gauche, gritty figure” (122) of the almost outcast Anglican priest. Born in 1869, provoked in part by Olive Schreiner’s strange anti-Rhodes parable, *Trooper Peter*

Halkett of Mashonaland, Cripps arrived in Enkeldoorn town in central Rhodesia in 1901. After some wartime interruptions, in 1930 he returned to establish his famous – some would say notorious – Church of the Five Wounds at Maronda Mashanu. He was sharply critical of white settler society, in both its racist complacency and its drive to modernity, and devoted his religious service to the Shona peasantry which, according to Brettell, he tried to assimilate to a myth-laden Arcadian pastoral. An understandable but superficial fond fallacy:

Come across an African village sequestered in a bowl of the hills, the brown cones of thatch rising from the brown earth as unconcernedly as a tree, children happy in the dust, women pounding meal, old men bent over intricate basketry, a cowbell hesitant on the edge of an immense blue stillness – and it is easy to be bemused, easy to forget the tyranny of superstition, the anxiety of drought and hunger, the dirt, the hunger, the kwashiorkor. (Brettell, *Side-Gate*, 122-3)

Nonetheless, a certain “ruthless honesty” and rigour in Cripps’s devotions, bordering on the saintly, earned him a grudging admiration – even, eventually, the central place in a novel, Owen Shears’s *Dust Diaries*. In any pantheon of Rhodesian poetry, Cripps features prominently: he occupies a commanding proportion of John Snelling’s landmark 1938 anthology of Rhodesian verse, and Guy Butler included him in his 1959 collection of South African poems. Brettell corresponded with Butler about Cripps, disagreeing with him on several points.

Brettell admired Cripps as a man, was willing to sit many hours reading poetry to the increasingly blind priest, and was close enough to be one of his coffin-bearers. Yet he is critical of the poetry on many counts. Cripps was, Brettell opines, too busy to devote adequate time to refinement or self-criticism, and “the greater part of his life never got into his tongue-tied poetry” (125). As his favoured reading indicated, Cripps revered the sonorous archaisms of Tennyson or Traherne over the looser Modernism of W H Auden. Hence he struggled to match a vocabulary, loaded with antiquarian English-isms, to his “incongruous milieu”. The result, in Brettell’s view, is “a quaint aloofness, an academic air” (125). He thankfully made no effort to interpolate “impis and assegais” like other poetasters striving artificially to evoke local colour. On the contrary, Cripps sought urgently “to translate himself, in phrase and imagery uncompromisingly English” (121), but with neither an especially musical ear nor

a sense of humour to offer relief. Something of this can be seen in an excerpt that Brettell quotes:

So, when the sun is almost down,
Bright in the slanting light we come,
Bearing our rustling grass-sheaves high
Against the splendour of the sky,
To thatch for Christ a home –

Though this is cleaner, softer than many other possible examples, we can observe here the familiar wrestle of the English poet to reconcile an imported language to a potentially alienating landscape, mostly by being vague. An allied part of Cripps's aloofness, Brettell goes on, is that he was no "nature poet": "He had no eye for the flowers of the veld or the tiny fury of the insects; and the great beasts have no place" (125). Not all nature is absent, though:

Living so close to the bare bosom and loins of Africa, walking countless miles into the remote fastnesses, brooding over solitary camp-fires, he bears in all his poetry a continuous obbligation to the countryside. Sun and hawk, wild sunsets and glaring dawns, nights quivering with stars, endless paths over ragged hills, drought, dust and storm – all these compose the background to his lyrics and satires, interpreting for us, as no one else has done, the significance of a life lived flat up against the primitive facts of Africa, and seen, not as a naturalist, a tourist or a Rambler, but with the eyes of one who had relentlessly made them part of his very existence. They are, naturally, all landscapes with figures. Against the scene we always see, as in a bronze relief, the people among whom and for whom he lived, the ploughmen and their pied oxen, the ragged little goatherds, the hoes flashing in the sun, beer brewing in black pots, feast and festival to the monotone of the drum. (124-5)

The lyricism here is as much Brettell's as Cripps's. Underpinning it is the established tension between seeing Africa as an unpeopled natural paradise (albeit furious with exciting predation), and one humanised in a "primitive" kind of way, also prone to stereotype or to artistic rearrangement. The phrase "bronze relief" echoes the title of Brettell's first poetry collection – the orderly,

hieratic Classical artwork at once echoing, enhancing and counterpointing the rich shagginess of Africa. Brettell's own vocabulary betrays a tendency to essentialise Africa as "bare", fecund and sexualised. In his section "October", cited earlier, Brettell conjoins "drought and Catullus" – the pre-eminent Roman love-poet – to exemplify an antithetical "sense of enchantment and repulsion, the taste of sweet and bitter at once on the tongue, of adoration for something we know to be a dangerous enemy [...] what mistress could be more frustrating, more indifferent, more incalculable, than nature herself[?]" (162). Yet, by his own lights, there is no "nature herself", only attitudes towards "her". Problematically for modern ecofeminists, the gendering of dangerous nature is repeatedly conjoined with the notion of the "innocent".

Encounters with innocence

Africa, or the wild, is *innocent* of what, exactly? Or in what ways? It is a term Brettell uses a number of times. In "Autumn Song" the poet listens to the "two cracked notes" of an African hoopoe's "simple-minded" song, a quintessence of the "bare unruffled African scene,/ Spare in line and brave in hue", "indolent" in its "unselfconscious nakedness". The third stanza is a notable rhetorical failure to work up a new language for this scene, laden with Wordsworthian pastoral vocabulary like "flagon" and "jocund". Yet this seems the necessary prelude to the imploring final verse:

Africa – timidly loved, half understood,
 Take my shy northern heart and teach it;
 Ease its drought and drain its flood
 And in your simple sunlight bleach it;
 Smooth my involuted sense
 With your two notes of innocence. (*SP*, 11)

This overdrawn dichotomy of simplicity and involution seems rather to wish for the erasure of extremes, for a pastoral gentling, than for a way of accepting Africa on its own terms. Other manifestations of "Africanness" present rather more threatening lessons. The very topography surrounding his Nyanga cottage, massive batholiths of scoured granite and spectacular river gorges, however beautiful in a poet's eyes, bespoke the intractability of the geological aeons that

preceded puny humans. Though he loved it, and planted vegetables and pines, it was not a landscape very susceptible to the pastoral, was even dangerous, with some lethal natural denizens.

In “The White Harrier”, the “indifferent” predator, whose “Lean taper of wing shear[s] through grey and blue”, stoops from its zenith with “flint eye, and hooks of steel” (a touch reminiscent of Tennyson’s eagle). It is “Immaculate of guilt, ruthless as innocent”. But it is also “thrilling”, and seems to help the poet jolt “amorphous thoughts” into more “vivid shape”, to slice through both “sloth and terror”. The inner contradictions run deeper: it is also “hesitant” and “forlorn”; its soft down represents “deceit”; the wind it floats upon can be “urgent /Or indolent”. A lexical set of hesitancy – “indecisions”, “cat-foot evasions”, “sauntering” – surely points to the poet’s own tardy diffidence. Indeed, it is moot whether the second stanza is addressed to the harrier or to the writer’s poetic self:

You who have searched so long, intent, indifferent,
Savage and merciful, on the wind urgent
Or indolent floating on eddies endlessly
(Will all the cowering indecisions die?) (23)

The closing, side-of-the-mouth question embodies that persistent indolence – as does the very final line: “(Is it the truth, that dives, and blinds, and kills?)”. Is “truth”, then, “innocent”, being direct, ruthless, indifferent, dangerous to the illusions and evasions with which humans muffle themselves? The poem is, in the end, curiously unresolved, more suggestive than conclusive.

Another wild “guard of the innocent” is the eponymous duiker doe which the poet one morning observes nibbling his roses (22). He compares the little buck to a unicorn as it appears to a sea-captain in a legend he’s just read – a characteristic technique, the local at once amplified, defamiliarised and domesticated by the literary. Unlike the unicorn, ridden by a mermaid, the duiker is subject to a “lurking fear”, tiptoeing “between alarm and appetite”, a “Quick flux of fear and feed, so odd assorting”. Wildness may be innocent, but it is not after all simple. It is, though, different from the complexities of the human condition, so prone to “hallucination”, invention and, ultimately, fear of death. As the poet turns back to his shaving-mirror, he is assailed by dread and uncertainty. He questions what constitutes true knowledge:

what is it comprehends
 Behind my still mirror while the shadows creep?
 To hold the timid minutes in close hands
 For truth: to love, to know – knowing, to keep:
 No subterfuge nor fable to invent,
 Unicorn, beast of the virgin girl, guard of the innocent,
 On silver snaffle down the morning snorting.

That is a characteristically ambivalent ending: the poet searches for the sturdy truth, but it's formlessly forbidding. The innocence of the tautly alert wild animal embodies that "truth", but it's the comforting fantasy of the fable – another kind of innocence, albeit ridden by a negative – on which the poem jauntily ends.

This poem can be interestingly juxtaposed with Kingsley Fairbridge's "Roses at Inyanga" (Fairbridge, 62). The earlier poem is not without ambivalence, but the nostalgia for England evoked by the imported flowers is underpinned by a confidence in Empire that Brettell could not share. No one, he wrote, would "dare" write such a poem now. *His* roses, by contrast, are consumed by the local animal. Interestingly, Fairbridge mentions in passing a grove of "grey-green wattles" – another imported species. By Brettell's time, these Australian black wattles had become both a major commercial resource and an uncontrollable invasive. In "Felled Wattle" (*SP*, 42), Brettell comments not on the tree's alien status, but on how some plantation-cut logs have tumbled beyond retrieval down Nyanga's precipitous slopes, never to be utilised in hearth, lintel, fence or papermill. In his tangential way, Brettell seems to identify with those excluded or rejected pieces-of-the-whole, abandoned by a society riddled with "rancour" and "insult".

If it's implied that human society and the reticent Brettell are somewhat at odds, the wild, however beautiful, offers little comfort. Africa's predators, "naked and undissembling", are threatening, "with gleaming canines notched"; they are the "beasts of truth", contrasted to the "beasts of dream", the lingering fantasies of European heraldries ("No Road to Xanadu" [46]). They are also in a sense out of reach: in two key poems, the poet's overtures to wild creatures are spurned. The first poem is "Wind and an Eagle Owl" (20). In Shakespearean fashion, a stormy wind in the night re-enacts a quarrel between the poet and his wife. In a transferred epithet, the speaker characterises himself as "timid", like the candle he blows out as they turn from each other into a night of "malignant

dreams". A cock lustily welcomes the morning, delineating each object's shadow yet "doubt[ing] each familiar shape/ With counterchange of heart and mind". This is almost a manifesto of method. The speaker's wife is, unexpectedly, perhaps shamefully, "kind". They take a horse-ride together into the hills, the poet's self-recrimination refracted through the "craven" cries of "peevisish, lamentable" plovers and his "timid filly". Shockingly, they find a great nocturnal predator, an eagle owl, smashed against a fence by the night's storm – an objective correlative of the damage wrought by the quarrel. This must be resolved, though in the owl's case it must be by a paradoxical act of violence; the speaker takes up a stick to finish it off. Of course the bird perceives only a threat. In return for his intended mercy, the poet encounters in the owl's "wildwood eyes" only "hatred". A complex cross-hatching or "counterchange" of emotions is at work. Within the careful rigidity of the stanzaic structure and slightly archaic use of refrain, a certain indirection hints at inner irresolutions. But the crucial aspect for our purposes is nature's fundamental hostility, its emotional imperviousness to human altruism.

In the second poem, "Spitting Cobra" (50), the physical encounter is similarly quickly turned to symbolic purpose. The cobra, found slipping "desperate" and "lost" on the kitchen floor, is on one hand gorgeous, the "colour of sun-warmed earth,/ Gilt-scaled, banded with turquoise,/ Silversmith-wrought in a age of chromium plate". Its artistic authenticity, contrasted with the superficiality of modernity, elicits a shift in status from "it" to "you". Its "poise" is, on the other hand, "lethal", the elegance "deadly": in return for his "kindness" in guiding the cobra outside with a stick, the speaker gets an eyeful of spat venom. In a startling last stanza, the poem takes an elegiac turn. Momentarily struck stone-blind, as by Medusa, he wishes that in this darkness – like Homer, perhaps – he might listen better for "her step, her voice, her laugh,/ To see in darkness what is lost in light". The painful truth of loss, embodied in the cobra's spit, carries one of Brettell's late, affecting elegies to his dead wife.

Certain creatures may be dangerous, but others show how nature is also vulnerable to humans. Even the predators of "No Road to Xanadu", quoted earlier, are liable to be met with the gin-trap, strychnine and cordite. The poem "Antbear" (39), with delightful accuracy, describes the nocturnal "queer clown", "gross" and "ungracious". Though harmless, like the harrier or cobra it is "innocent, with no guile". The antbear is somewhat protected on the poet's "warm acres", but the human recognises the animal as the more "ancient tenant",

he its “debtor”: “Am I your guest, or are you mine, I wonder?” It is in any event still threatened: the poem ends with Brettell echoing T S Eliot channelling John Webster: “But keep the man far hence that’s kin to fox,/ For with his lust, he’ll dig you up again”. Brettell clearly in some way identified with the shy antbear, both being “surly wits, hermits, world-forsakers”.

He is cooler about the elephant. “Elephant” (7) is a powerful poem about a powerful animal, a “Behemoth, baron, lord”, moving slowly through the landscape, indeed *in* the landscape, “its massive flanks/ Like the still slabs of riven krantz”. As so often, the poem is troubled by the articulation of naturalistic detail and foreign encrustations of fable, “the old enormous lies,/ The load of legendary centuries” of the “Old World”. It seems the poet wants his animal to walk away from all that, but then it is described in mechanistic terms, “monstrous pistons in the wrinkled sheath”, “a great engine” leaving a “vaulted terminus” – like an inadvertent avatar of the very machines that spell its demise, the “miles of metal” crossing the continent. The poem, on the surface, ends positively: the elephant is,

In trigger-fingered world, one creature left unscathed;
 Away from us, over the burnt earth, under the prostrate branches,
 Casually stripping the green crown from a tree,
 Going oblivious, the invulnerable beast.

But “burnt” and “prostrate” hint at an undercurrent of damage and defeat; and we know, as Brettell must have known, that even the elephant is by no means “invulnerable”.

Taken together, these poems treat animals as caught between their “natural” beings – their “innocence” – and the writer’s inevitable imaginative overlays, whether imported from Old World legend, literary allusion, or more contemporary metaphor. These imports load the subject with significances to which the subject is oblivious. A good example is the depiction of a praying mantis perched on a radio aerial, “Indifferent to the yearning desperation” of Kathleen Ferrier performing Mahler’s “Das Lied von der Erde”, electronically conveyed between its very feet through that “singing wire” (“Mantis and Moth” [36]). For the writer, it’s a condition that both illuminates and alienates. Revelation incorporates obliteration; the only recourse is, in Brettell’s praxis, a conscious self-deprecation, a recognition of limits, a diffidence.

Some comfort may lie in the thought that, once the holocaust has come and gone, once all is burnt, nature has a remarkable power of recovery. Bushfires are, in season, a common threat to human and animal life alike. Fire is a prominent subject in the poems comprising Snelling's 1938 anthology; and in "Spiderwebs" (33) Brettell writes of both fire and recovery. It's interesting to track how he worked a prose description in *Side-Gate* (161-2) up into poetry; the two versions share crucial phrases. Unlike most of his stanzaic work, the poem is in free verse, and to us now is the more approachable for it. The poet walks out into the "veld blackened where yesterday's rampage of fire/ roared through the clotted refuse of the past". If this implies a kind of cleansing, it is also disorienting. Walking into the ashes with his back to the rising sun, the poet cannot see his own shadow, "that familiar doppelganger, double/ the long man of the downs". Thus bereft:

I was alone at the cold end of time,
no portent to the front, no retrospect behind,
the naked rocks as stark as lunar beaches.

A marooned state – echoing, surely, the pioneer geologist Charles Lyell's famous phrase, "no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end". He seems to lose not only his sense of self, but of time entirely – a true apocalypse. However, turning back to the east, a surprise: "cobwebs, thousands of them, clothe the burnt tussocks". They seem for all the world to be made of "gossamer", the same sail-cloth on the "black ship of death" of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Brettell, it seems, can't resist the literary amplification. In the prose version, he remarks on the word *gossamer's* provenance and usage, from Titania to Coleridge, but also that "such moonshine fancies obscure the other more astonishing fact that, for its size, a thread of spider's silk is one of the toughest fabrics spun by any creature". This teacherly aside doesn't make it into the poem, but it shows that Brettell was well aware of the problematic relations between literary fancy and reality. What does get into the poem is the thought that these "relentless little carnivores" might well survive not only the seasonal fire but "the deadlier cataclysm", the one in which "we have destroyed the earth". Contra Coleridge, then, the spiders' gossamer webs are sails of life, and perhaps portend an ultimate, though not romanticised, resurrection:

Could they, perhaps,
 on the morning after the last of all our wars,
 emerge from their snug tunnels,
 cover the enormous poisoned desert
 with their pellucid woof of homespun?

Falling

If Africa's relentless predators might put one on edge, so too might some of its landscapes. The problem with the habitual essentialisation of "Africa" – including Brettell's – is that there are of course many landscapes, ranging from malarial coastlines to snow-capped mountains, from gaunt deserts to humid jungles. "Africa", like "Nature", exists inextricably in its imaginaries. As is well-documented – refracted so colourfully through Roy Campbell – imperialists and their colonial successors tended to characterise their Africa as hostile but conquerable, an arena for heroic cultural self-assertion. This was true as far as it went, but there were also the fertile, beneficent lands and regions of salubrious climate which enticed many of them there in the first place. There was beauty to fall deeply in love with. In Brettell's case the granite peaks and dizzying declivities offered both extraordinary "sublime" beauty and intimations of danger – not a few people have vanished in the sinkholes on the highest massif, Inyangani. Nyanga's impenetrable batholiths make one feel diminished: one can regularly feel, as does Brettell in "Wagtail", as fragile as a bird flirting on the lip of a waterfall.

Before focusing on waterfalls, I want to touch down on – not unlike the archetypal arriviste European – the southernmost edge of the continent near Cape Town. In "Prospect: Cape Point" (*SP*, 48), the poet stands on "the last gnarled toenail of the world", feeling not so much an "island" (referencing Donne) as a "headland", a "last lonely spar/ Facing the slap and slaver of the surge". On the one hand, a causeway links him, with a "primaevial urge" to human friendship, "The hum in pub of chum and booty and bloke". That's a line quintessentially *English* in vocabulary and rhythm, underlining his strangeness; it is echoed in the hints of beauty in anemones he spots in the water, their colours the alien hues of heraldry, "argent and gules". But that is the language he already possesses: the sea's "muttering vernacular" he is still trying to understand. On the other hand, then, the sea encroaches: the "stones of friendship [...] piled haphazard on the sand" are threatened with shift and

dissolution. On this “hungry enclave of the verge”, the poet recognises and grieves (quoting Eliot’s “East Coker”), “They all go into the dark –”. The final section is beautifully rendered, and unutterably bleak:

Indigo in the trough and fire on the crest,
 In lifting menace, lips back-curved
 From the white flash of teeth,
 Voracious appetite of shark,
 Mumbling in hunger underneath,
 The breakers gnaw at the tousled turf,
 And, phlegm from an old man’s throat,
 The spume spatters the shifting of the beach.
 Inscrutable, remote,
 Beyond imagination’s utmost reach,
 Nothing between me lies
 Before, oceans beyond, the face of the oblivious ice.

Shades of Ruth Miller, as we will see. In the very different environs of mountainous Nyanga, similar confrontations with wordless, indifferent oblivion recur, calling into question the efficacy of poetry itself. In the “*Winter*” section of “*Quartet: Ex Libris*” (27), the imagery overlaps with that of the seashore poem. He describes one day as like a fragile tent savaged by a stormy wind which “*Ripping long rents in the grey canopy/ Reveals the bitter arrogance behind./ Before the ice-blue gritty indignation/ The last live creatures pelt in panic*”. This natural cataclysm churns on into the “*gullet of night*”. Poet and cat curl up with book and fire, but there intrude intimations of apocalypse, as the “*last log shifts, topples, collapses*”. They startle at the sound of what might be a gunshot, a poacher perhaps:

Easy to shrug back to our book: not yet
 Affairs of ours, not yet: not till the ultimate wrench
 Snaps the last guyrope, and
 The billowing, bellowing canvas split
 Between us and the infinite.

The implications of falling into death here are intensified in the several poems centred on waterfalls, with which Nyanga is spectacularly endowed. The lost

logs of “Felled Wattle”, quoted earlier, are poised for dissolution at the edge of the sayable:

Only the reiteration of the cataract
Plunges its hundred feet of paradox,
Betrays the void with wordless imprecation

That words themselves are raised as a shield against that “paradox” is implicit in “New Year” (31). This poem describes how a weir has been built across the “petulant stream”, rendering it “all-but-voiceless”, “glutted”, “thwarted”. James the government water-clerk comes to take meter readings, manifesting a national regimen of “geometric” control and legalistic monitoring.

But you can only tame a mountain river
For a few yards. After an olive sliding,
Sleek as an eel-skin, over the basalt shelf,
Flexing of shoulder muscles for the eager wrestle,
Against the random barriers of the gorge,
It leaps, splits, foams and overcomes
The haphazard fashion of the broken bed;
Finding its voice again

Here is that paradox we noted before: the discovery of a kind of liberating beauty in precisely that which leaves the controlling weir of language and comprehension behind. So the poet is also inevitably “split”, like “Janus”, like the “chameleon, swivel-eyed”:

Before, the savage catclaws of the rapids,
Behind, the sullen measurable flow.

In the final analysis, that “savage” and predatory intimation is of the void of death itself.

In “Wagtail” (38), subtitled “at Pungwe Falls”, the poet’s characteristic timidity is contrasted with the bouncy little bird’s daredevil flirting “with the skirts of death” at the falls’ edge, an “unseen torrent of air spun with the spume”. The “timid” poet draws back, having “no head for height, no longer heart for

venture”; he asks rather for the “quieter flume,/ Sliding slow over pattern of gold”. He slyly admires the “dilettante” bird, “merry little clown” tripping

with blithe unconcern
 Above the verge of no-return.
 I cannot follow you: I have no saving
 Skill of winds: and if I slip I drown.

Such intimations of the closeness of death naturally grow stronger in old age, and for Brettell especially after Eva’s death. He prepares himself, in a way, writing of the undertones of darkness haunting even the most treasured moments of togetherness. “The Summit” (40-1) is one of Brettell’s most deftly structured poems, neat as any verse of George Herbert’s. I find it intensely moving in the very way the stanzas control emotion. The couple climb to a mountain peak where, “Breathless, serene”, they simply appreciate their foregoing decade together:

This is our wanted world,
 Our guerdon, bliss,
 All we had hoped, contrived,
 Narrowed to this.

The last three stanzas, however, take a more sombre and forbidding turn, as the setting sun throws their shadows “over a far gulf/ Unmapped, unmade [...] catching the wild light/ Of day’s overspills”. The final posture is ambiguous, either ruminative or defensive: the couple watch, “Chins cupped in hands and knees drawn up,/ The ultimate hills”. Or are the hills themselves “drawn up”, metaphorically? Or both, as if human and landscape merge at the final demise of light?

That poem anticipates another of Brettell’s tender elegies to his wife, “Wild Orchids” (52), subtitled “at Chirwa Falls”. He recalls a time they stood together where a “slender stream fell headlong”, and raptors circled “below our toes”. It is Eva who brought his vertiginous fancies back to earth, discussing the identity and beauty of a circlet of orchids. Now she is gone:

And now again
 I stand alone, on the despairing verge.

Speak to me, love: keep my feet to the earth,
 Lest, hung for an instant on the falcon's wing,
 I drop – to what?

He ends – diffidently – on a question. At the edge of life, one hears “Not the cataract’s boom but the voiceless chute/ Steep slide of silence” (“Thrush” [51]). The exact quality of the void must ever be an unknown; the lip of the waterfall is as far as our words and our imaginations can take us. One can only then, as he puts it in “Cloud” (53), “stare into the sky”.

Perhaps the indifference of nature has always been at the very heart of humans’ existential fragilities. The planet’s urban dwellers in particular may no longer be subject to leopards or lions, to the mysteries of disease or vagaries of weather that, for want of more immediate explanation, were once attributed to a variety of imagined spiritual entities. Some gods were as capricious as the phenomena they represented, downright malevolent, or at best protective if ritually mollified. Even the loving god of the Christians – fervently followed by Cripps, and paid some lip service by Brettell – proves in practice largely inscrutable. And in the absence of belief, the indifference of the world and its creatures to human fate arrives bald and unmediated. In this current era of accelerating climatic disorder, even city dwellers cannot feel immune: “nature” permeates our very livers and lungs, poisoned by our own impassioned and inventive progress. In mountainous rural Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, nature “in the raw” of course was that much closer to Brettell, intruding on his civilised and bookish life in wild and (*pace* Eppel) startling ways.



Chapter Four

Ruth Miller's green islands

In mid-1969 a literary conference was convened at Rhodes University in the small Eastern Cape town of Grahamstown (now Makhanda), under the auspices of the Institute for the Study of English in Africa (ISEA) and the commanding figure of writer and academic Guy Butler. The administrative organiser was Sydney Clouts, the poet then embarking on his Master's thesis under Butler's supervision. Alongside such heavyweights as Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer and Douglas Livingstone, Clouts had invited another secular Jewish poet, Ruth Miller. On the evening of 7 July the Rhodes Theatre hosted a reading, as Clouts enthused in a letter to his wife:

And what a reading it was! Guy read first, then Douglas Livingstone, a marine biologist from Natal, ex-welterweight boxing champion of Rhodesia, his head thrust deep into his neck and shoulders, almost crouching, and desperately nervous [...] Then Perseus [Adams]. I read fourth, some poems by Ruth Miller whose husband was a special guest of the Conference. (Quoted in Wylie, *Intimate*, 62)

The special status of Wolfe Miller, himself a sometime novelist and economist, may have been because Ruth had died of cancer literally a week before, on 31 May. She was only 50 years old.

She may not have appeared anyway; according to her main sponsor and later compiler, Lionel Abrahams, she was preternaturally shy and silent at public events, though she could be voluble and adamant in private company. She was well-respected for pieces that had appeared in the small magazines, not least Abrahams' own *Purple Renoster*, and for two individual collections, *The Floating Island* (1965), which had won the inaugural Ingrid Jonker Prize, and *Selected Poems* (1968). Twelve years previously, in correspondence with Guy Butler, who was publishing some of her poems and had asked her for a biography, she had

responded with a characteristic mix of diffidence and pride:

Biographical sketch as follows (how I hate them – they sound so barren and artificial) Born at Uitenhage, Cape, in 1919, educated at St Pius' Convent, Pietersburg, poems published in various defunct S.A. journals such S.A. Opinion, The Democrat etc. and in S.A. anthology edited McNab, and in Canadian Poetry journal, and in London Magazine, and in War Poems of the United Nations.¹⁹

A year later, after years of secretarial work, she joined St Mary's School in Johannesburg as an English teacher. In asking Butler for a reference in early 1966, she said she could "claim a certain success as a teacher", having suffered not a single pupil's failure – "despite lack of [an] academic degree".²⁰ She had always been rather sensitive about this lack of any formal qualification beyond Matric, evidently believing that in some way this compromised her poetry. She wrote, again to Butler, that her "poetic illiteracy is as intransigent as granite".²¹ A rare statement of method is equally self-deprecating: "one writes a poem, mulls over it, puts it aside, re-reads it with a sense of wonder that one had passed anything so gawky. And this is the short road to an intellectual despair, if not to the sin of misplaced pride!"²² When he did write the requested testimonial Butler, while obviously concerned to portray her in the brightest possible light, was not being dishonest in considering her "one of the best of contemporary South African poets".²³ This assessment has been upheld by virtually all subsequent readers – not least of all the influential writer-editor Lionel Abrahams who, twenty years after her death, published a broader selection, *Ruth Miller: Poems, prose, plays* [hereafter *Poems*]. Abrahams insisted in his illuminating Introduction that she be "ranked with the best of South Africa's poets in English," having produced "a number of the most tragically incisive poems in this literature" (*Poems*, 9).

It is now more than another three decades further on from Abrahams' definitive collection, and Miller has enjoyed a certain resurgence of interest, notably via three critics. Michael Chapman has written substantially and

19 Miller to Butler, 22 May 1957; Amazwi Literature Museum, 73.350.3.

20 Miller to Butler, 16 February 1966; Amazwi, 73.376.2.

21 Miller to Butler, 26 May 1958; Amazwi, 73.350.5.

22 Miller to Butler, 23 March 1957; Amazwi, 73.350.1.

23 G Butler, testimonial for Miller; Amazwi, 73.376.3

periodically on Miller since at least 1984. His latest (2020) foray surveys his own responses over that time. His earliest approach was governed by the then prevailing artefactual, impersonal, somewhat dehistoricised mode of reading poems, the so-called New Criticism or “close reading”. Later he was seduced by the increasingly fashionable schools of postmodern “deconstructionist” thought, reading “against the grain” or “symptomatically” for allegedly hidden ideological or psychological import. In the 2020 article, he tried to strike a balance between these poles, acknowledging the force of agenda-driven readings but urging a return to the persuasive power of poetic technique itself. Chapman’s personal wrestle over how to read Miller reflects shifts and fashions within literary studies more generally, and is reprised in Abrahams’ musings on the matter in his Introduction to *Poems*. He too seems somewhat “double-sided” (*Poems*, 10) – torn between reading the poems as more or less impersonal expressions of a “philosophical pessimism”, often refracted through inherited symbolic tropes and parabolic stories, or as barely disguised emanations of an actually tragic life. One of Miller’s two sons was accidentally electrocuted at fourteen, she separated from husband Wolfe in 1966, and cancer consumed her last years, though these events clearly only intensified a pre-existent outlook. She was not a raw “confessional” poet in the mode only a little later broached by Sylvia Plath and others, and she would have “hated”, avers Abrahams, having her poetry interpreted in so personal a light. (She closely echoes Clouts, and indeed other contemporary “late modernists”, in this respect.)

She might well have demurred at being read in deconstructionist or agenda-driven modes, too, as a second recent critic does. Joan Metelerkamp, followed up by a couple of her feminist postgraduate students, has insisted on reading Miller *as a woman*. The third critic, most relevant to this paper, is Wendy Woodward, whose focus has been prompted by a new “animal studies” thrust within ecocriticism. Woodward draws on some heavyweights of the French school, Jacques Derrida’s oft-referenced essay “The animal that therefore I am”, and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “becoming-animal” as expounded in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*. Woodward’s readings of Ruth Miller’s numerous animal, bird and insect presences are, like Metelerkamp’s and Chapman’s, persuasive as far as they go, but I think all three critics are somewhat hobbled by their respective agendas. In brief, there seems to be an overriding desire to read the poems in more-or-less positive vein, whether in terms of craft, feminist advancement, anti-apartheid ethics, or, most relevantly here, an avowed

“reverence for nature”. This assertion also began with Lionel Abrahams, whose view was doubtless coloured by personal acquaintance. Abrahams wrote of Miller’s “stoical insistence on *aliveness*”:

It takes the form at times of energy (as symbolised often by the sea), at times of instinct and freedom (repeatedly associated by her with animals); she locates it in our response to natural beauty in creatures, plants, and landscapes, and in fact in the whole life of the senses as a self-sufficient value, a real and spiritually necessary splendour while it lasts. (*Poems*, 15)

All our critics have more or less unquestioningly echoed this line, while only here and there acknowledging her “tragic vision” or “philosophical pessimism”, even “cynicism”. I am not convinced that any of these characterisations is quite right, and a sub-theme of this chapter will be to suggest that the positive bias comes at the cost of ignoring or underplaying the context of an enveloping existential stance of coruscating *negativity*, of an ecosystem of perpetual danger and precarity, ever-imminent death, and cosmic annihilation.

In the following reading, I must stress that I will be delineating *a* vision as articulated by the *poems*, not using the poems to attempt a psychoanalytic portrayal of *the person*. Miller may well have held views and performed activities – of “reverence for nature”, say – that simply do not appear in the poems.²⁴ It’s always a tricky distinction, but I’m offering, in an unfashionable sort of way, a reading of the *poems*’ apparent world-view, as a kind of cumulative, not necessarily always coherent, construction or fiction. Moreover, it may be I am introducing my own possible distortion, that of another “symptomatic” search, this time for ecocritical evidence, potentially marginalising other dimensions.

What ecology?

These caveats notwithstanding, there can be no question that a substantial proportion of Miller’s poems lend themselves to an ecocritical reading (even perhaps an ecofeminist one, though neither Metelerkamp nor Woodward

24 Moreover, there exist a substantial number of unpublished poems, held at Amazwi, a thorough survey of which might yield a modified impression (though not much, as far as I can see). At any rate, my analysis here is based only on Abrahams’ selection.

quite go there). Elements of the non-human world permeate the poetry, from land- and sea-scape environments down to individualised creatures. A goodly number of poems are explicitly centred on non-human creatures – fox, mantis, cat, kite, dog, penguin. Among many natural elements, spiders, bees, leaves, trees, pebbles, rocks, perhaps above all birds, appear repeatedly, sometimes naturalistically, but seldom without additional symbolic or psychological implication. It is abundantly evident that Miller observed the natural world quite closely, and could write about intimate behaviours, anatomical features, and contexts with considerable precision.

The next question is: how *ecological* is Miller's depiction of the non-human? This is trickier to answer. It obviously depends partly on one's definitions of *ecology* and *ecosystem*. Does one insist on the narrowest, scientific definition of ecology as "the study of relations between organisms and their environment", classically excluding the human? Or a wider definition which includes human activity and impact, and even human symbolic productions such as poems, within the "ecosystem"? Humans as the observers and classifiers cannot be *entirely* excluded from even the narrow version. On the other hand, the broad version can grow so encompassing as to include anything that's connected to anything (e.g. the oft-heard "business ecosystem"). So one is left to postulate some or other intermediate variant of what Donna Haraway has called "natureculture". There is no single answer here. One can range, moreover, from a view of nature as incorrigibly a Darwinian "struggle for existence" characterised primarily by violence and predation, through to some or other amelioration of Darwin's "entangled bank" which includes beauty and pleasure, cooperation and symbioses, as equally efficacious drivers of evolutionary dynamics.²⁵

Where on this spectrum might one place Miller (allowing for inconsistency over time and mood)? In what aspects might she be "ecological"?

First, as I noted, she is closely observant of the natural. The anatomical detail of her famous poem "Mantis" (*Poems*, 52) is a good example – the insect's "jagged legs", "pear-shaped pod/ Flanged for flight", the "tender green blades of him". This does not however extend to an awareness of its place in a functioning ecosystem, as a scientific ecologist might insist. Miller's sense of connection is more intuitive or personal, which is to say she extracts aspects and

25 There is more and more of this kind of thing, not least Haraway's own contribution to a key collection, edited by Anna Tsing and others, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

images which she imagines or experiences as fusing with or mirroring dynamics of her own psyche. The poem is laden with epithets of forbidding emotional import: “terrible”, “roared”, “vengeance”, “vicious”. If the poem is alluding to the mantis trickster-figure of Bushman mythology, it is not out of reverence: he lifts his forelegs to a “god of nothingness”, and is filled with “knowledgeable malice”. Wendy Woodward wants to emphasise “continuity between human and insect corroborated by their common mortality” (“Dogs”, 77). Fair enough, but this remains a meeting less of imaginative co-empathy than of confrontational mutual horror: “I saw his face grow large as mine .../ Would the terrible triangle of my face/ Make *him* afraid?” This serves to foreshadow and exemplify two characteristic aspects of Miller’s ecology: a vision of the natural as dominated by dispassionate Darwinian predation; and a sense of the ever-present imminence of death, “Now that I am brittle as a twig/ Time having squeezed the sap and wrung me dry”. If there is appreciation of “aliveness”, it is repeatedly in the elegiac mode; pliability and sap-filled youth are gone, no more than a passing phase.

Still, as Woodward argues, we might in certain instances regard Miller as expressing a “natureculture” in which human perceptiveness and expressiveness is projected as intimately interfused with natural elements (regardless of emotive direction). “Mantis” is one instance, albeit daunting. Another is the more positive poem “Indigenous” (*Poems*, 80). This is one of literally only a couple of poems to take obvious pleasure in natural phenomena, and it is notable for its melding of topographical and animal imagery:

Low scrub rattles in the hot
 Mouth of the wind. A hawk
 Hovers on blue nothingness.
 Scorpion seeks the coolness where a snake
 Unrolls its long gnarled root
 Beneath the indomitable shade
 Of a grey wild fig, twisted, gaunt
 With age, with remembering
 Before the wagons’ creak the scream of spears,
 Before the spears, the formidable silences.

Where shadowed water slides, the moss
 Grows like an emerald pelt. The sun
 Lies like a leopard down. Sleep-filled
 The river moves in earthy caves.

The roots are bitter, but bees
 In the furred pollen hum.
 Birds nest in dead trees;
 The rain, it seems, will come.

At this point the mood is tentative and ambivalent, but then we get one final, indented stanza of contrastively more positive tenor:

Rain, when it falls, will lie
 Softly on the grass.
 The beneficent sky
 Will green-raise Lazarus.

That stanza feels to me a little forced, tacked-on, as if the poet had belatedly decided she'd better give the Romantic quasi-religious "seasonal renewal" motif a bit of a look-in. For throughout the poem, the pleasure is not unalloyed. There does seem to be a kind of evolutionary progression towards release or improvement, towards the pollen and greenness of a spring resurrection. It may be a glancing riposte to T S Eliot's drought-stricken *Waste Land*. But there is also the characteristic backdrop of nothingness and silence, the threats of ageing and the signs of death, and the misanthropic reference to human violence. (Indeed, the poem on the facing page in Abrahams' arrangement, "Credo" [81], contains a line that projects exactly the opposite: "who lives in wilderness must expect no rain".) If "Indigenous" is an imagistic meditation on what makes one rooted and naturally belonging, it seems inconclusive and tangential. Note the poem's suggestive references to the uncertain qualities of wind and of water that "slides" (a favourite word, indicating repeatedly that the very world appears unstable). Even the use of the word "green" is ambivalent.

Given the ubiquity of this eco-friendly but politically-charged moniker these days, perhaps it's worth tracking its usage through the poems, as a short-

hand if possibly anachronistic gauge of the ecological. Certainly Miller expresses (doubtless echoing Andrew Marvell's "Bermudas") "green thoughts" (98), but not all instances of *green* are ecologically significant. Once or twice greenness does figure seasonal renewal, as in "Fruit" (74), but even there it's couched as elegy to a lost richness of childhood. Similarly, the poem "Autumn" (106) evokes "leafery in a green summer", but it's with reference to goldfish stranded "on a pavement", and greenness is what they *can't* even remember. So mostly the implications are unpromising. These lines are representative:

- "Oil on sea/ green slicks" (36)
- "Green things grow in the wrong places" (37)
- "Here there is no greening sedge to wither" (42)
- "Our green uncharted islands sink in ravelled floods, blind-eyed" (71)
- "the blinding/ green hills of our sorrow" (88)
- "You whispered each green grief" (89)

The second line comes from the poem "Aspects of love", and seems to valorise the persistence of natural life, "putting forth greenness on outlandish stone". However, the primary subject is not nature, but the bizarre capacity of love to persist against the odds, to "unfeather" within "the emphasis/ on noughts in the sum". The unusual word "unfeather" is ambiguous, though: it could mean either "unfurl", or its opposite, "pluck". Indeed, the second section of the poem abruptly opens: "Love? We should smother it/ And push it up the chimney". That's only one voice among others, to be sure, and not necessarily the poet's, but it's one that reinforces the dominant strain. Part 3 of "Aspects of Love" depicts the warmth of a rescued bird's body in the poet's palm, but such moments of succour, aid, and loving-kindness are all too fleeting within a fundamentally meaningless, "zero-sum" universe.

Similar tensions may be discerned in the baggy but heart-rending poem "Cycle" (89-93), half paean, half lament, written in the wake of her son's death. The third of its seven uneven parts seems to promise some sort of persistent ecological cycle of renewal:

Does a leaf spurn the tree when the leaf dies
 Can trees forget to grow because the cold
 Slides along the arrows of each one

Does sap itself not learn the leaf-shape mould
 From form of nothing, so the empty sky
 In a grey sorrow, grows a leaf-shaped sun?

If this reads as iconic of ecological integration, growth and renewal, in context it reads rather as a despairing, querying hope to counterbalance the irreversible loss, figured several times as a “dropped leaf”. If once the departed’s grace “spread in patterns of brightness”, now the patterns are “of doomknowing darkness like a circle of nothing/ On circles of water” (92).²⁶

I imagine like most of us Miller balanced these perspectives against one another, hope against despair, love against loss. In this context, then, are those moments of succour and beauty more meaningful and important, or less? More real precisely by virtue of their ephemerality, or merely illusory? A question to return to.

The sea, the sea

Everyone of course lives in an environment of some kind, which will necessarily include natural elements, even if it’s only city air, feral pigeons and pot-plants. Some poets, like Clouts in Cape Town or Noel Brettell among Nyanga mountains, write repeatedly and organically about their belonging there. Douglas Livingstone devoted himself to the ecological health of one particular zone or “bioregion”, the Natal South Coast. Ruth Miller seems to have cleaved to no such particular place: she evoked a variety of landscapes, from the Karoo to a city garden, from a township scene to Sardinia Bay. However, like Livingstone she referred repeatedly to the sea and its littoral. She apparently holidayed regularly at the coastal city of Port Elizabeth, not far from her birthplace, Uitenhage, though neither appears specifically in any poem.

Lionel Abrahams claimed that for Miller the sea symbolised and embodied “energy”. I read the dominant trend in Miller’s many oceanic references differently. Certainly there are a few passages of arresting observation, even beauty, as in “Galatea”:

26 She once wrote that when hope was lost “it had to be trailed like an indistinct spoor” (to Butler, 23 March 1957; Amazwi 73.350.1).

Come here, where the land lies sloping
 In shallow saucers, tilted against the sky
 Pure and calm as milk on the horizon. [...]
 Demanding the blown tresses of the sea
 The backflung arching crests and the green thunder. (*Poems*, 65)

While Miller undoubtedly appreciated the scene, the wider context of the poem is forbidding. Centrally the poem alludes to unrequited love, as between the mythical sea-nymph Galatea and the spurned Polyphemus (Virgil's narrative of the affair provides an epigraph). The poem's unnamed lover voices a separation as definitive as that between land and sea; Galatea is "unappeased", "scorn[s]" the land, is "bound, enclosed", and ultimately "frozen in marmoreal regret".

The gentler, more elusive poem, "Plankton" (83), also seems to figure unbridgeable division, initially between the "cats-eye green" of the usual sea and the "bloodred stain" of the West Coast's infamous periodic "red tide". Enjoying swimming, "cleansed and clean as air", the speaker(s) "marvel" at the strange phenomenon, but it's also threatening (this algal bloom is in fact lethally toxic to some forms of marine life). In the opening stanza it's imagined as the blood of the fallen Icarus. Drawn temptingly on into the "Massive, smooth, unclenching" ocean, the swimmers are themselves almost "engulfed" in the "ominous tide" of crimson, and have to force themselves back. The final stanza seems to allude not to the natural phenomenon, but to an intra-human relationship of some kind. Even as the red tide "flowered and died",

Away from us, died too
 The bright day, a fallen feather.
 Apart, we left the strange sea
 Within each other.

Separation and sharing ambivalently coexist on the shoreline of incipient failure. Similarly, in "Meridian" (120), a middle-aged man falters and stumbles blindly along the littoral, while "the hissing tide/ Leaves him on the hard dry shore". This is Miller's characteristic mode, sensually precise but the natural/istic turned to symbolic, generalisable force.

There are several other beach-set poems. In "The Scribe" (78), as with

“Mantis”, the poet figures her own situation in that of another creature. The gyrations in sand of a sea-snail etch a kind of primordial script.

The wet sands bear the signature of tides
Which tides erase, as though their document
Were only for the ears and not the eyes.

But once, upon an open beach intent
I found a pale ribbed shell poised to discover
In lurching slime, the ecstasy of space.

It moved in slow gyrations, turned and doubled
Upon its tracks, moved east, then plunged to west,
Heaving, awkward and directionless.

This “flight of singing hieroglyphs”, swinging its “lariats and arcs” as across a blank page, is in one sense as exciting as the discovery of language. Opportunity borders on “ecstasy”. Yet there are troubling signs; this script too will be obliterated by the tides, even as a sense of entrapment tightens in the final stanza:

Obdurate, who must believe in signs
I stood breathstill, until the sliding shell
Entrapped me in its maculate design.

As humans, perhaps, we are both liberated by and trapped by our capacity for language, our stubborn need for signs, which themselves are a kind of sully of natural purity. Design by definition is “maculate” – literally, spotted, marring.

That word “sliding” recurs. In the rather cryptic “Departure” (76), a relationship evidently comes to an end as a ship leaves harbour. The “sliding sea/ Cancels landlocked memories”, even as the equally fluid “sea-wind blows/ The past into the nulling past”. Rather than energising, then, the sea nullifies. It is repeatedly envisaged as remote from landlocked human endeavours, including love, the concept of time, and indeed of words themselves. Venturing therein is even fatal, most obviously in “Submarine” (60). This poem begins with another image of a “swagger[ing]” Icarus plunging to his fate in the “crumpled sea”. Enacting underwater what Icarus performed in air, the submariners intrude into

the darkest depths:

fathom on fathom, the lords
Of the earth and sky in their sleek phallus ram
Through forests of throttled night.

But their macho hubris of steel meets a similar demise: the sea's "coiled weight" and the "persistent tides" wait to "smash" such mechanical pretensions. This might validly be turned to ecological grist ("Nature" will triumph over human destructiveness), though the compacted final line indicates a more psychological target: "Those whom dark hells in privacy corrupt". Whatever the sea symbolises here, it constitutes a corrosive and unwelcoming grave. Far from being the traditional symbol of eternity, of energising change, or of Livingstone's "great menstruum", source of original life, the sea for Miller is death.

Even more disturbingly, the sea can itself die. The title of "The Anarchist" (73) would seem to promise some energetic drive to upheaval of some kind, but no anarchy registers in the poem at all. Rather, it is a picture of disappointed ennui, figured in a sea that lay "too calm", "blue and cold", "disconsolate" in "limpid death". "'Where has the sea gone?' cries a puzzled child./ A gannet broods on rock, and slowly blinks." The broader cosmos seems indifferent. The poem ends: "The fortune-teller moon in her streaming hair/ Sandalled the silver beaches, unashamed." The symbolic import is unstated, and might be turned to ecological import, though not exclusively.

In a related poem of eco-apocalyptic implication, she quotes the Spanish modernist Federico Garcia Lorca: "Even the sea dies ..." (121):

Are you sure it will die?
What evidence
Is there to prove it,
Does it not move, is it not visible
To our small vision?

But the gulls, "with their wild sense", know "that its death will be certain and terrible/ For we shall die with it". It is far from clear that this death is humanity's fault, but surely nature's fate is also ours.

Blindness, suffering, inconsolable loss, death – all are simply the indifferent

constituents of cosmic existence, Miller's poems imply. Nowhere is this more movingly stated than in a final littoral poem, "Sea Idyll" (87). It is no idyll at all, since the poem describes a blind dog wandering hopelessly along the beach, upon which also lies, quite separately, the "smashed" wreckage of a dead seabird. There appears no prospect of rescue for the dog, no resurrection for the bird. The speaker, "riven then / Whelmed by the stricken will / Of blind dog, and dead seagull", seems helpless – as am I, even if (as Woodward insists) I find myself entering what must be the dog's sightless desperation. Herein lies an important paradox: we are, despite all the a-moral, even accidental, unthinkingly vicious evolutionary forces at work, a *caring* animal. The depiction of a hard, incalculable universe paradoxically enhances that propensity to care even as it overwhelms it. Did Miller intend that, or am I, having been pre-disposed by my particular upbringing to care about other creatures, reading my own compassion into the poems?

Becoming animal

I suspect this is what Wendy Woodward does in explicating "Sea Idyll". In general, Woodward claims that "Miller's poetic speaking self undermines conventional ontological differences between human and animal by challenging the abyss between human and animal, an abyss inherent in the western master consciousness which relegates nature and animals to the position of absolute alterity" ("Dogs", 74). Miller depicts, rather, "heterarchical" relations between animals, including humans. I would largely agree, but far from being a comforting impulse, the implied sense of "community" is overwhelmingly one of conjoined precarity and death – a "kingdom of shared graves" ("Sterkfontein"; *Poems*, 64). Woodward does recognise this, but chooses to emphasise the individuated agency of animal consciousness: "While these two beings may suggest something mythic about the inevitability of lack of sight and death, they are, at the same time, autonomous earth others" ("Dogs", 79). To the degree these creatures are autonomous, however, to that degree are they *non*-continuous and *unreadable* (Derrida's problematic).

Miller could not have read Derrida's essay, but her engagements with animals – especially cats and dogs – echo the dilemma he outlines at the beginning of "The animal that I am..." The naked philosopher seems obliged to acknowledge the apparent "absolute otherness" of his cat, whose mind he cannot access, even though the conceptual division between "human" and "animal" he

considers a “crime”. Miller’s poem “Two cats” (*Poems*, 104) alludes to this mysterious inaccessibility. A black cat is “disdainful of the human” but nevertheless stays home, while a white cat is drawn outwards into mythic realms of moonlit desire. They reflect, perhaps, two poles of schizoid human need, for homeliness and for adventure. Either way, their motivations seem unreadable.

Canids seem to offer the strongest vectors for such explorations. “Dog” (54) is the most dense and demanding of this sub-category of poems. It begins with a long quotation from Rilke: “... the point from where it begins to be dog, the place in it where God ... would have sat down for a moment when the dog was finished, in order to watch it under the influence of its first embarrassments and inspirations.” Miller expands on this moment of creation, “when God made dog and found it good”, into the hesitant advent of an independent consciousness. This consciousness becomes aware of scent, suspects anxiously that there is “chaos somewhere” as well as other dogs with motives and reasons outside of the creator’s centripetal control. Moreover, whatever might be said of dog-sense – the feel of a “stick in the mouth [...] a feather/ becoming bone to be buried” – it is “Nothing but recreated/ In the imagery of a poet”. This seems to imply that only the poetic imagination can carry one into “the Other”; where dog becomes itself is “one of the places/ Where there can be no argument about first causes ... exactly where God chose to place his finger”. Even as Miller writes of the capitalised God, she seems to be detaching – a premonition of the decidedly anti-theocratic tenor of many other poems. Perhaps she desires that more carefree, in-the-moment consciousness that dogs seem so easily to embrace, but is unable to disentangle from thought entirely.

Two other canid poems venture further into that world of “chaos” anticipated in “Dog”. In “The Fire” (112), the poet addresses a fireside dog, urging it to be calm, not to “growl” or “bay” or “bristle at an unaccustomed creak”, and to “Forget the black night”. These are aspects of wildness, inherited impulses of the wild fox resurfacing in the domesticated dog’s psyche. But it is not only a real dog being observed: the poet is also addressing her own waywardness and anxiety: “lie down, dog of the heart”. The dog (the heart) “shivers with desire”: “Desire? And you so warm and fed?/ Lie down, dog”. One might read this as another iteration of the homely/restless dyad of “Two cats”.

The second canid poem picks up on and focuses on the wild environment of the fox alone. “Fox” (79) is both more obviously and more elusively symbolic – more obviously because Miller seems to have envisaged an English fox, an

animal she would not have encountered herself; more elusively because its point is less bluntly stated than in “Dog”. It’s a fine poem, both beautiful and disturbing. Miller might have had Ted Hughes’ “The Thought-Fox” in the back of her mind. A calm opening stanza rapidly gives way to a harsh oppressiveness:

Regard her now:

In her tongue-heavy accursed
Mouth the silt of thirst,
Pain in her urgent bones
Dust in her lungs.

Fear presses down her breath
In a grey gasp, and death
Commences on her skin;

A “message” on the wind “brings her round/ nose to ground”, searching out a cold clear stream where “the moss/ Velvets her feet, and brackens stir.” This peaceable or Edenic anticipation proves delusory, however:

Ah, look at her

Shuddering with empty breath.
Wind and water have few words:
Fox mis-hears, impelled toward
The scent of death.

There is no sign here of succour; God has vanished. This imminence of death haunts a great many of Miller’s poems, apparently rendering all words and messages dubious, perhaps redundant. Repeatedly, the elusiveness, if not impossibility, of an unambiguous and trustworthy transmission of meaning is figured once more in the sliding and uncertain qualities of water and wind.

The fox, the predator, is here paradoxically vulnerable, tied into a pervasively violent ecosystem. Repeatedly, Miller refers to this rapacity in the mammal world. In “Cold” (50), the mouse is taken by the conventional “sly cat” who “pounces on what is already half extinct”. In “Rat” (58), the poet-speaker

depicts herself as a timid mouse – Burns’ “wee cowering beastie” – besieged by “big brother Rat” banging about in the ceiling, which is also one of the “rats in my head”. The poem’s second section is as close to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “becoming-animal” as anything she wrote:

I am become a mouse in a field
 Waiting the shear of the blade
 In the sticky sun with the grass
 Yielding under my thimble weight.

I am become a long whisker
 Twitching, a face
 Like a cut stone, a single muscle
 Stiffening, awaiting the worst

Which is coming, surely,
 Down the field of my days
 Humming in the mouth of the wild
 Buzzing in the clean swathe.

The final stanza, though, makes clear that – whatever Miller felt about actual mice being sliced up by implacable agriculture – it is her own sense of rejection that is the real subject:

When you hold me in your hand
 Tenderly, for an instant, before
 I am flung to the stubbled ground –
 I shall receive no comfort, Lord.

The poem also implies that humans are amongst those predators, as violent and heartless, and also as vulnerable, as any. Another fairly thoroughgoing exploration of this idea is the poem “To private forests ...” (115). Nature and psyche figure one another:

To private forests where tigers were never bright
 We stumble because we know the claws that rake.

Being wise during the event, we recognise
 Entrails which, though smaller in the lamb
 Are identical to the tiger's sheen and gut.

We – humans – likewise do not escape this tooth-and-claw, Blake-inflected, “private forest”, and are “much afraid”:

How the black trees yell their fat derision
 As vulture and hyena wait their turn
 Crouching, to lick lick lick our lamb-pure bones.

That is seriously chilling. Miller sums up again in “All things end in mystery” (124):

The tiger hunts the deer
 The spider eats her lover
 The heart's a tireless hunter –
 There is circumference but no centre.

As we will see, Miller observes this ecosystemic violence governing other creatures, too, from the “poor lizard, in the prowling paws of winter” (“Sunday drive”; 40), through birds, to insects.

Bird-life

Abrahams asserts that for Miller animal presences symbolised “instinct and freedom”. I can go along with the first epithet, but hardly the second. I assume Abrahams includes birds here; at least, among Miller's many references there are images of birds sailing away into clear skies. Nevertheless, I am not convinced that “freedom” is invariably an accurate characterisation. Certainly in “The Other Poet” (115), “the free, the untutored intellect” (which is not quite *instinct*) is described as “A bird with gaunt wingspan” (like a gannet, say), diving into the sea and emerging with “the silvery prize”. The poet-speaker's nets, by contrast, “lie empty”. But if that is freedom, it belongs to someone else. Moreover, it's none too attractive: the bird is described as “cleaving fiendish arcs [...] brittle and muscular in the impending dark”. Gloomy, devilish, only ambivalently

enviable. In “Metaphysic” (107), “Bird” is capitalised, as if allegorical of a core principle, the principle presumably being that “Each pattern suffer[s] a change in form”. The particular change described in the poem involves the breaking of a tree, and a bird that consequently “flies the nest”. It is “fat” and “unafraid of harm”, but its awkward freedom is only “to seek yet another worm”. And out there, the sun is “unyielding”. In “Afternoon” (55), “One bird, forlorn/ Coasts on the cold blue sky, adrift, alone” – a bleak kind of freedom, if that’s what it is. And perhaps doomed anyway, to judge by the poem “Learning its scope the heart” (100):

Learning its scope the heart grows harder,
Flies like a bird on muscular wings,
Holding no hope it travels farther
To such tall skies it no longer sings.

This “muted bird who must aspire/ On soaring dedicated wings” seems to begin as a Phoenix, but ends as an Icarus – a self-destructive image we have encountered already. The bird can only sing, the poem concludes, if it “return[s] to the tree”, to be “small” but “entire”. A longing for homely stability, rather than winged freedom? As another poem asserts, it is better to be “tossed together/ In a white wave, than to see/ The ocean like an eagle”; “Cold is the bird/ Who flies too far [...] Their faraway eyes are bitter” (86). In most instances, birds seem all but unreachable. Gulls, for example, appear a number of times in her littoral poems, but they are remote, even “uncontrollable” (121). In “Dredger” (105), they “seem not to care” about the harbour’s noise, and the poet cannot achieve their detached “birdpeace”, nor dredge up more than “choking weed”. More grimly still, “The Affirmation” (97) turns out to be horribly ironic, even sarcastic. A “starved baby-bird” is rescued by a child, fed crumbs until it can fly away again – whereupon “another child,/ Catapulting his stone into a tree”, crushes its head. So much for flying as liberation: birds in all these examples seem rather to stand as a warning against dreamy idealism.

Nevertheless, in that last gentle albeit futile gesture of compassion, emerges a topic that can certainly be termed “ecological” in a contemporary vein: the catastrophic human impact on other creatures. Miller offers three prominent bird-centred depictions. The first is the famously oil-ridden but rescued “Penguin

on the Beach” (35). It’s a distressing scene, repeated a thousand-fold since then,²⁷ though in this case the poet’s voice is quiet, dispassionate and restrained. The poem may be the more powerful for that.

Stranger in his own element,
Sea-casualty, the castaway manikin
Waddles in his tailored coat-tails. Oil

Has spread a deep commercial stain
Over his downy shirt front. Sleazy, grey,
It clogs his sleekness. Far too well

He must recall the past, to be so cautious.

Though the poet anthropomorphises the bird to a degree, the projection of the penguin’s inner state is here assumed rather than fully imagined. The empathetic imagining grows stronger through the poem: his “head’s small knoll [...] retains the image” as he re-enters his natural element. He has become, as a result of his experience, “Ineffably wary, triumphantly sad”, and “trusts nobody”. Even rescue by well-meaning enthusiasts must be experienced by the bird as traumatic. But the central tragedy is that even the sea he rejoins “tastes black”. Perhaps Lorca was right.

The second example is a lesser-known short play-for-voices, “The Finches” (133-41), which closely echoes Rachel Carson’s prophetic book *Silent Spring* about the environmental toxicity of mass poisons. Seated in a pub, the Farmer praises the pilot George’s “grand job” of poison-spraying crop-eating finches. George passes off his task as just another “living”, though one that’s more liberating than sitting at a bureaucratic or petty commercial job, as his drinking buddy Tom does. “Man was made to fly,” George enthuses. Miller, however, dramatises and inserts the countering voices of one of the birds themselves – those who were truly made to fly, without mechanical aids:

27 See P Chapman & R J Watling, 1980. “Oil pollution studies in South Africa”. *South African Journal of Science*, vol. 76. 534-5.

I am one of God's creatures, I
 was one of God's creatures, I
 shall no longer fly
 in the acres of pasturing sky.

In the ensuing bar conversation, a clash of aesthetics ensues. The barman finds the finches "beautiful [...] like a sunset", while the farmer asserts that his "crop in full head/ with the top bursting [...] the Chinese jade of lucerne" is also "pretty". He bolsters this with the practical point, "Where do you think you'd be/ if we let vermin kill the living food?" The finches are a "scourge", a "pestilence". It is Tom the accountant, whose hands are ostensibly clean but whose work nevertheless enables the spraying, who has spasms of conscience. He alludes to the Biblical saw that not a sparrow falls without God's knowledge, the birds being "A precious gift – until one dies/ and then – was God in conference?/ Was his phone jammed [...]?" These troubled musings are interrupted again by the Bird, who puns with bitter irony and pathos:

It's a living, it's a ...
 Dying ... It's a dying all about us;
 limp, soft, inert; petal feet curled
 in the last grip which finds nothing [...]
 we fall like seeds on the land – even the road
 is splashed with the harvest Somebody has gleaned.

Tom then expresses a broader ecological view, in which the environment, in God's evident absence, exerts its own countervailing force:

Lines of road to pull us straight
 on course. Ribbed red corduroy fields –
 lined with telephone wires – they sketch
 us into the pattern, draw us out
 like a spider in her lines of web.
 One day we'll mix the message and we'll spray
 butterflies or bees – no matter – we will say
 our lines got crossed [...].

This thought – that humanity will find itself trapped in the deleterious effects of its own rectilinear but indiscriminate technology – foreshadows the play's dénouement: George crashes and writes off his plane. He himself escapes with minor injuries, which seems altogether too light a sentence, though perhaps even that is Miller's comment on the whole injustice of it.

If birds will eat crops conveniently placed in their path by humans, humans in turn eat birds. In the third example, "Turkey at Xmas" (99), the poet takes another jab at the heartlessness of human commerce and exploitation, with neither sentimentality nor overt symbolisation. The turkey, destined for the Christmas dinner-table, is more individuated than the finches. He is described as almost comically regal, "massive in feathers" with "gold legs", the "ultimate in garishness". The poem does not indulge in prettifying the bird, still less in granting it easy victimhood or an attractive personality: his head, a "wattled vermilion nightmare", holds eyes that are "round and cruel [and] bright with hate". While humans cage him and fatten him up like a "gorged and glossy shrine", he "looks and looks with venom". (One is reminded of Brettell's eagle-owl.) The poem's critique rests rather in the terrible irony that, in the closing lines, "he learns to know and love the hand/ That feeds him daily helpings of his death". In a sense, beyond the critique of human hypocritical rapacity, this exemplifies that Darwinian view of a violent ecosystem in which humans appear as just another predator. Caring is a mask.

The ecological issues highlighted in the three poems – oil-spill damage, mass poisoning of the earth, and commercialisation of animal life for food – have if anything intensified and expanded in the interim. The poems certainly evince a subdued, ironic, or compromised kind of compassion for the creatures killed and traumatised by modern industrialisation, and hint that nature might have "intrinsic value" in a more depersonalised or "Deep Ecology" sense. But it seems to me that the existential envelope of ultimate annihilation renders the very concept of "value" redundant or moot.

The spider and the bee

It is relatively easy to "become-animal" in relation to a domestic dog or cat, more difficult with wild mammals. Miller oddly seems to evince compassion most obviously towards certain birds, which one might assume are still less compatible. Insects, of course, are conventionally regarded as most remote

from us of all, allegedly devoid of emotions or communication capacities with which we might feel integrated or integral. Even the honey-bee, for all its positive depiction in literature, art and symbolism, appears to exist in a world utterly distinct from ours.

Among a variety of treatments of insects in Miller's poems – we have already met the famous and forbidding "Mantis" – the bee is the burden of one long, somewhat rambling piece. The title quotes W H Auden, "All value your pure Alas" (116-9), and indeed the poem is saturated with sadness. The poem certainly valorises the bee, its industrious beauty, even identifies with the bee, taking on its voice:

I might

Well have stacked up my legs and my belly with gold
 And danced in a lyric, a logical gyre
 To call out the gleaners, the gatherers, willed
 To the place I discovered, the acre of fire.
 [...]
 Blameless, worthy, punctilious
 A knight faring forth with a lance, a killer
 In defence only, a bringer
 Supple as wax, golden as sex, the loved
 And the provider, bursting with pouches of shivering dust [...]

These beautifully observed passages are, however, enveloped in an implicit narrative of failure and blame. The bee – which, by now unsurprisingly, also stands for the bee "of the heart" – heads out looking for flowers and pollen, but finds only desert: "Reconnaissance, alas, unfavourable". Who is to blame for this situation? The bee seems almost obsessed with avoiding the accusation of culpability. It might even be "pitied/ for the anxious hours spent/ in a winged blur/ the ceaseless hunt", with "all the wild world/ ready to trip/ him up, to kill". This dangerous milieu is figured in human terms, too: "Fists are for blows [...] a stone within the knuckles". The most primordial tool of violence, the fist, is associated with the desert, with a catastrophic plunge "into that stony place/ Where hurt rocks hurt at the pain because they ache/ To hurt the pain they cause". Illogic and involuted grammar enacts a tortuous failure, which even a "pure Alas" cannot assuage. Despite the naturalistic description and ecological resonance – bees are

today in crisis through habitat depletion, poisoning and disease in many quarters – the final sections of the poem make it clear that the “heart’s bees” – a failed love affair, or at least unachieved ideals – are the “real” subject:

Ah, there is more to death than killing
 And more to love than a lover’s visit.
 Should he not have searched even further when the desert
 Was so near and the blossom might have withered? –

Who made it wither?
 I said the hand
 Which nourished the sand.

Who gave it pain?
 I said the brain
 When I sought out each grain.

Who made it smart?
 I said the heart
 With the stone that was meant to hurt.

In these slyly paradoxical nuggets human self-pride – the Icarus syndrome – is undermined; our very achievements prove to be our downfall. Notions of some edenic, originary golden age – “a gone away time” – in which “all the value” might have been placed, have been disbursed. No “hovering logic” can explain; no “pure Alas” can compensate. The poem ends thus:

Alas all values, all impure –
 The bees hungry, the desert vast,
 We are never really sure
 Of any word except impure Alas.

It is virtually postmodernist, a collapse into a murky, post-truth bleakness which is both personal and ecological, indivisibly.

The predatory nature of the bee’s world is replicated in that of the spider. We saw a little earlier the image of agricultural roads and fields as a spider-web

drawing us into our own problematic demise. In a number of poems Miller evokes the beautiful and intricate engineering of the web, but as usual the admiration is qualified. What the spiders weave are “riddles unexplained” (54). Web-building is associated with both embroidery and making poems. In the slightly contrived poem “Across” (45), the poet furiously composes:

Words, cut quickly! Stitch, stitch
 Bright needle, furiously the cloth!
 Soon we may not be able to recognise which
 Is spider, which breathing, which a folded moth.

I will return to *words*, but note for the moment an essential mysteriousness that for Miller characterised composition – though the mystery of silence was greater still. The lovely poem “Voice. Silence. Echo” (43) is a series of puzzled questions probing the true character of those three “things”. Regarding “what the echo is”:

Is it a voice that hangs from a voice like a thread
 Swaying, swinging, a spider, or a shadow
 Cast by a column, the darkness on the splendid,
 Or something beating like a heart in a forest?

Again the natural seems like an extension of the psychic, indistinguishably interwoven, though the “splendid” brightness of intimacy is cross-hatched by darkness, just as sound is both contrasted with and contextualised by silence.

The central poem in this context is, however, “Spider” (40). It begins in apparent appreciation:

No spider struggles to create
 The beautiful. His tensile arc
 Knows mathematics in the dark:
 A Michael Angelo of air
 Who weaves a theory that states
 Ultimatums on a hair.

This might be taken to exemplify the “instinct” Abrahams says Miller valorised. Though anthropomorphising to a degree, it is not quite “becoming-spider”. The emphasis is rather on difference; unlike the poet, the spider “has no unsolved problems” and “suffers no dichotomy”. In a further twist, however – like the gannet in “The Other Poet” – the enviably natural creature turns nasty:

[He] wakes to work and works to kill;
 Beauty empiric in his greed,
 Perfection in a villain’s skill.

We may appreciate beauty, but in reality that beauty is harnessed to the Darwinian necessity to procreate, hunt and feed, so awful it seems deceitfully evil. (I think of Iago’s charms.) The poem then takes a familiar turn inward to the psychological. The human poet may be regarded as an evolutionary triumph – the “Ragblown summit of the ooze/ Of soft warm mud that split and stirred”. The primary symbol of human supremacy is the “word”, which the poet holds “sealed and socketed” in her “skull”. She weaves away with “artifice and ruse”, spider-like, but her strands prove “witless”. They lead only to death. In the final stanza, “the poor cold corpse of words” (the poem itself, I take it) is laid out on a “candled bier”, while the tearful poet retreats to weave on “in silence, grave and bowed,/ The pure necessity – a shroud.”

Nothing can rescue me

Miller is no Mary Oliver, and no Deep Ecologist. In virtually all examples, natural relations are depicted as, to echo Hobbes, nasty, brutish and short. The human is as predatory, and as vulnerable, as any animal. I can find no example of mutualism or symbiosis in her representations of the natural world: “the inanimate alone/ shows charity”. This bleak ecosystem is both externally objective and psychically internal – a “private forest”, she calls it – pointing towards, ultimately, entropic dissolution.

Perhaps no poem sums this up better than one whose popularity she came to resent. The “floating island” in the poem of that title is a piece of ground, crowded with animals, that is swept helplessly down a flooded river towards the

waterfalls of oblivion (the Zambezi and Victoria Falls is the allusion²⁸). This material, natural event is a figure for our common hapless, myopic, existential predicament:

Wrenched from our continent, we blunder
 And lacking weather-sense for guide
 Our green uncharted islands sink in ravelled floods, blind-eyed.
(*Poems*, 70)

We live – as many ecologically-inclined thinkers have commented – on a lone green island improbably floating in an inhospitable cosmos, largely “turning a blind eye” to our ultimate fate. Miller herself, by contrast, is unflinching.

Do such instances of recognition, beauty, tenderness, and empathy as we find in Miller’s oeuvre amount to “reverence”, as Abrahams and acolytes repeat? The poet Charles Eglington made the strongest case for Miller’s spirituality in a tribute reprinted in Abrahams’ compilation (*Poems*, 19-29). Eglington acknowledged that Miller nursed “wounds that could not be staunched”, that her “sweetness was often ‘sweetness with an edge of bitter’”. A serious understatement, in my view. Her “enigma”, according to Eglington, is that even sadness could “take on a glow of tenderness and joy”, and that this enigma could only be explained in “religious” terms. Not churchy orthodoxy, to be sure – Miller regretfully but scathingly dismissed “God” – but by the expression of “the rapt attention she devoted to natural objects [that] entranced all her senses”. Eglington supports this by quoting one phrase from the poem “Blue-mantled Mary” (36) – “each day is holy” – and reducing that to “her belief”. This is entirely to ignore that mantra’s context, the fact that the poem is a sardonic take on the birth of Jesus, “bloody in the byre”, and implicitly on the poet-speaker’s own fearful pregnancy, which for her presages only death. The whole section reads:

And I remember
 Unhallowed, un-Mary’d, this seed must grow
 Slowly towards its day – though each day is holy –

28 Discussing a draft of “Floating Island” with Guy Butler, she mentioned that, “According to a news report, an island did, in fact, come floating down the Zambesi [*sic*] during the recent floods” (Amazwi 73.350.1).

Towards the windowless
 Breathless lusty breath
 Of a full-term Death.

The speaker double-emphasises her alienation from the comfortingly religious; the holiness of the day is parenthetical and begrudging, if not sarcastically disbursed. Yet Eglington, apparently unable to contemplate this sardonic hardness, repeatedly distorts poems in this way. Invoking poems of “nature” such as “Snow” and “Penguin on the Beach”, he foregrounds Miller’s observant sensuousness and stoic joy in life, but only by dint of comprehensive misreadings. Eglington admits at the end of his warm and admiring homage that he is unable to read her objectively: he is patently enamoured of the person and cannot separate her from the work. As for the work, I think a clear-eyed reading implies this: If we take “reverence for nature” to mean that Nature provides a quasi-spiritual substitute for a manifestly absent God, the poems’ answer would appear to be a gravely disappointing No.

Where experiences of beauty or comfort are evoked, they are most frequently in elegiac mode, remembered from a more innocent childhood, necessarily superseded by tough reality. Ultimately, we are beyond redemption. The poem “Come not unto me” (39) – another subversion of a Christian homily – is prefaced by an epigraph from *Faustus*: “... for nothing can rescue me”. Most dismissive of all: “Nothing can be uttered./ Nothing nothing matters” (126).

Ironically, many poems suggest that the very material of their own being – words – are as ephemeral as anything else. It’s apposite to end with the poem entitled “Words” (53):

Some words tie, bind, ravel
 As air on air, untroubled
 By the invincible passage
 From meaning to message.

But from message to the meaning
 There is no way of learning
 The word that should be sounded
 Exactly as intended.

The heart then to such dullards
Remains the only tutor.
The meaning becomes valid
In the brainless future.

Which is to say, of no validity at all. The paradox here, of course, is that Miller continued to write poems, each a small monument to its own dissolution, or a stay against the void even as it records its ephemerality. She remained, almost despite herself, something like a heart beating in the forest.



Chapter Five

Sydney Clouts's phenomenology of birds

On the publication of Sydney Clouts's solitary volume of poems, *One Life* (1966), N H Brettell wrote from Bonda Mission, in the Nyanga Highlands:

May I take this chance of giving you my appreciation of your "One Life" which I have read & returned to with great enjoyment. (I know enjoyment isn't the word, but you will understand.) I find the hint of strangeness & your unusual angles of view & your oddly haunting images both arresting & disturbing – and it's disturbed (rather than comforted) that we need to be now. I like especially your animals, your hippo and mouse and "Animal Kingdom". I think most of us feel that's the only innocence left in Africa & innocence doesn't come to us as it did to your Thomas Traherne.²⁹

Brettell was referring obliquely to one of Clouts's most intriguing poems, "Thomas Traherne and the Pebble Outside". The last of its independent, nuggety lines reads: "This heathen bit of the world lies warm in my hand." The poet is literally "in touch", appreciative if not reverent, even as he puzzles over the problem of being "outside" of nature. A problem of animism, one might say.

Brettell was not alone in finding Clouts's poems both attractive and discomfiting, reflecting a more widespread split in reception. One common response has been to cleave gratefully to those more "innocent" and obviously beautiful natural and especially animal images, and therefore to suggest that Clouts was some sort of naive "nature poet". Though Clouts denied that label, poet and academic Stephen Watson disparaged him as a kind of failed colonial Romantic. But many of the poems are indeed discomfiting, unusually angled and oddly haunting, not reducible to easy meanings or paraphrase. Cecily Lockett was therefore more accurate in bracketing him with Douglas Livingstone

29 Brettell to Clouts, 1 June 1969. Amazwi 2004.37.154.

and Ruth Miller as late modernist. Unlike Livingstone's knotty, argumentative grappling with self-conscious forms and heterogeneous voices, Clouts's poems often have a cryptic, imagistic transparency that is at once limpidly sensual and endlessly rich in inexpressible implication. A second response was, then, to regard him as simply too "difficult". Politically, he was regarded as pretending to a detached and mandarin mysticism, therefore as inappropriately removed from the grimy urban politics of apartheid-era South Africa, too insular and inaccessible to be of great "relevance" – the favoured term of the day. All of these responses, I think, are partially accurate at best: in my view he was, to use J M Coetzee's word, the "purest" South African poet of his generation. His devotion to being a poet was all-consuming, his one life.

Sydney Clouts was born in 1926 in Cape Town, and lived there until 1961 when he and his family, distressed by apartheid's violent and exclusionary politics, left to live in London. He died there, at the same age as Roy Campbell, of cancer in 1982. The Cape and its environs were his fundamental inspiration, though, his poetic life-blood, and the move away eviscerated his capacity to push new poems to a publishable state. Even his posthumously collected poems amount to a mere 145 pages. Most of those poems are saturated with natural images: not just the animals Brettell mentioned, but trees and forests, rocks, seascapes, coastlines, clouds, unruly winds, pools and streams. Dominating it all, the fabled bulk of Table Mountain. He walked everywhere, observed the sheen of light on leaves, the march of a row of pines, water running under a rusted gate. He wrote most frequently, though not exclusively, *through* rather than *about* relations with the natural world, and he did not write in the current vein of addressing the global ecological crisis, as did the scientific Livingstone. In writing about eucalypts, for example, he was not concerned with their "alien" status; or, in describing a quarry, with human damage to wild environments. Rather he was pervasively concerned with how his perceiving being was articulating with – and articulating – natural light, shapes, scents, a kind of sensual existentialism, or, I suggest, a phenomenology of interfusions, the beautiful as well as the troubling and, even, the violent.

A phenomenology of birds

Clouts likely derived the title of his single published collection, *One Life*, from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "The Eolian Harp". There, the music of the

wind, “like birds of Paradise [...] hovering on untam’d wing”, exemplifies

the one Life within us and abroad
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where
(Richards, *Portable Coleridge*, 66)

What is the import of this synaesthetic meeting and becoming and interfusion? To what degree does Clouts conform to this Romantic conception of soul-ful “joyance”? I argue here that Clouts’s primary purpose is to point towards a fundamentally inexpressible sense of immanent belonging, not so much spiritually transcendent as necessarily material, dynamic, transitory and experiential – in short, phenomenological.

Clouts’s phenomenology begins – as that whole line of thought does in some genealogies – with Baruch de Spinoza. For Spinoza, the “concatenation of things is one”, and “the decision of the mind, together with the appetite and the determination of the body, are simultaneous in nature” (quoted in Wylie, *Intimate Lightning*, 239). Clouts certainly read and refers to Spinoza, and also to one of Spinoza’s inheritors, Martin Heidegger. Heidegger argued that “when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by interpretation” (240). Clouts wrote similarly about “how one gives being to objects, because objects don’t really exist out there without being affected by the life of each person who sees them” (240). Moreover: “Poetry always produces that integrity of spirit and matter, joining word and theme and feeling and thought, so that the poet [becomes] an elemental force” (in Butler & Harnett, “Sydney Clouts”, 9). Even closer to this mode of thought is perhaps Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose very mode of delivery is as much poetic as philosophical, “more often interrogative, suggestive, elliptical” (Carman, quoted in Wylie, 241). For Merleau-Ponty, the “enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen [...] a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world [...] like the mother water in crystal, the undividedness of the sensing and the sensed” (242).

We have no evidence that Clouts read Merleau-Ponty, and he certainly did not read Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s strange book *A Thousand Plateaus*,

since it only appeared in English five years after the poet died. Deleuze and Guattari may not be pure phenomenologists, but they pursued a related kind of poetic, anti-Cartesian “undividedness”. Certain of their passages seem so eerily appropriate they might as well have had Clouts himself in mind, or vice versa. Clouts seeks a mode of being-in-the-world that implicitly critiques the expressions of “natural transcendence” evinced by the Romantics, including Coleridge. Rather, he is participating in what Deleuze and Guattari call the “post-romantic turning point” in which “the essential thing is no longer forms and matters, or themes, but forces, densities, intensities” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus*, 343).

These “forces” are well-enacted in Clouts’s poem, “The Feeding of Doves” (Clouts, *Collected Poems* [hereafter *CP*], 3).³⁰ It’s a rare instance of a flock of birds in Clouts’s work, an early piece which does not quite achieve the aphoristic clarity of later poems. It is, however, characteristically concerned with the nature of the “self” and of poetry, and with the relationship between thought and the natural world. It opens:

Doves beleaguered me,
 turtledoves, ringdoves.
 Nuts and breadcrumbs I had,
 and a thought taking wings,

of the pensive diet
 digested on eaves
 of the city, on windowsills
 glancing seaward[.]

The first three lines seem to emanate from a separable observing “me”, bearing nuts and crumbs, but the fourth line initiates a whole new and startling kind of integration. The thoughts as it were “become” doves flying up; the “diet” is as “pensive” as the poet. Thoughts, crumbs and doves entail and structure one another, having meaningful presence only in relation to one another – “mind and nature as one,” as Clouts put it (in Butler & Harnett, 9). The doves’ “glancing” movements entail and structure the world around them, including

30 You have a choice between the edition cited here, edited by Marge and Cyril Clouts (David Philip, 1984), but now out of print; or a more comprehensive annotated collection, *Seahorn Messiah*, ed. Dan Wylie (Netsoka, 2020). Available from www.netsoka.co.za.

the poet's presence, in multiply interlocking and seamless ways, inscribed in the glancing brevity of the lines themselves. The doves swirl

on extensive perches of wind,
then westward,
through clouds delivering space
to a flagpole high on the hill,

to the pines, to an outcrop
feeding the hill, hard fluttering stone:
a ripple from the sky:

earth-energy
munching its particles,
fat fullfed.

All is movement: even the “perches” are unstable. Agency is not located in the poet or observer, but in the objects themselves: the clouds “deliver” space, the outcrop “feeds” the hill. In the latter image, rocky buttresses are subtly being compared to, or rather absorbed with, rock-like crumbs. Everything feeds everything, in “fullfed” interchange; everything is “earth-energy”. It is, *avant la lettre*, an ecocentric vision. All these persistently transferred epithets are doing a strange thing: they are evoking the central subject, the doves, even as they describe something else in their world. Doves and world are both distinctive and indistinguishable. Clouts or the speaker is not merely drawing comparisons or analogies (*I am like a dove*); nor indulging in sentimental wishful thinking (*Oh, if only I were a dove*); nor trying impossibly to be wholly absorbed into a different discrete entity (*I am/could actually be a dove*); nor being merely symbolic (*The dove means/stands for X*). There may be elements of all these in the various deployments of his bird-presences, but more is going on: a sensate perception of being-in-the-world which is inarticulable outside the world of the poem itself. Something much more organic is being postulated. Correlations and inter-dependencies are being fused within a single motion of thought and writing. The gesture of connection *enacts* rather than merely describes a self intricately imbued with, and imbuing, the world within which it subsists, evolves, and finds its meaning. The self of the poem seems unconfined by that meagre pronoun “me”: that self

not only observes, but rather *is*, the spaces and motions it describes. Clouts said: “The relationship of the poet with things is always being another” (in Butler & Harnett, 9). The self is as wide, as intimate, and as protean as its perceptions, and these perceptions actively constitute the unfolding “self” – an unpredicted yet unquestionably authentic new aggregation of qualities.

Another way of explicating this is via Deleuze and Guattari’s now popular notion of “becoming-animal” (read in this context “becoming-bird”). In their chapter “Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Human” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, they explain:

To become is not to progress or regress along a series. Above all, becoming does not occur in the imagination [...] Becomings-animal are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here? For if becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not “really” become an animal any more than the animal “really” becomes something else. Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which the becoming passes. [A] becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself [...]

Finally, becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation. Becoming [...] concerns alliance. If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms (238)

Rather than the conventionally Wordsworthian “recollection in tranquillity”, it is a meeting of mind with physical situation *in the moment of writing itself*. The poem (to borrow Adrienne Rich’s formulation again) is one *as* experience, not one *about* experience.

Amidst the flow of becomings and interrelations, stabilities do settle, like the doves. These stabilities Deleuze and Guattari would call “stratifications” or “territories”. Always, however, there are forces and energies escaping or breaching or returning to those strata, in multiple processes of “deterritorialisation” and “reterritorialisation”. Or as Clouts put it: “The imagination disestablishes its own constructions continually” (in Butler & Harnett, 37). These motions

Deleuze and Guattari call, appropriately, “lines of flight”: the poem is “permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities” (*Plateaus*, 40). Birds, for Clouts, are just such “nomadic singularities”, sometimes settling and congregating, sometimes embodying a line of flight, of thought, and of verbal expression, out of and beyond the ordinary.

Swooping, rippling and fluttering in momentary cohesions, the doves also exemplify the Deleuzian notion of the “pack”.

Among the characteristics of a pack are small or restricted numbers, dispersion, nondecomposable variable distances, qualitative metamorphoses, inequalities as remainders or crossings, impossibility of a fixed totalization or hierarchization, a Brownian variability in directions, lines of deterritorialization, and a projection of particles. (*Plateaus*, 33)

Both “flows” and “particles” – perhaps drawing on the vocabulary of quantum physics – are favourite word-concepts in Clouts’s work. The directions the doves take along hidden lines of unpredictable energy are variable and Brownian (defined as the “random movement of microscopic particles suspended in a fluid, caused by bombardment of the particles by molecules of the fluid” [Collins English Dictionary]).

I want to go further to suggest that the notion of the “pack” helps describe Clouts’s poetic technique itself. His startling metaphors and correlations perform “qualitative metamorphoses” of the given, enacting “crossings” and dispersions of particles (words and images) in non-hierarchical ways. The unfoldings and infoldings of Clouts’s most “pack”-like poems encourage a non-linear, aggregative manner of reading and therefore of relating to the world. This seems counter-intuitive: “These combinations are neither genetic nor structural; they are interkingdoms, unnatural participations. That is the only way Nature operates – against itself” (*Plateaus*, 242). As I understand this, Deleuze and Guattari mean that the mechanisms of Nature cannot be explained merely by a narrowly Darwinian genetic genealogy or “filiation”, nor in terms of any pre-designed or imposed structure or blueprint; there are events continuously arising out of the “Chaosmos”, all but unpredictable new aggregates forming and temporarily stabilising on new “planes of consistency” or “fields of immanence” (154). Each poem might be regarded as such a field, surprisingly fresh but achieving a certain consistency within itself.

“The Feeding of Doves”, then, acts as the trace of multiple such not-quite-aleatory encounters between beating heart, perception, mind, language, and physical objects, compressed into a startling, grammatically fresh, assemblage of words – the poem.

Falling into perception

Birds, as the example above shows, are scarcely divisible in Clouts’s poetic treatment from the air they traverse, the rocks on which they perch, the trees in which they shelter. They are less common, as images, than water, stone, trees, sea and other natural elements, but their presence is frequent enough to warrant special scrutiny, and – I hope to show – do indicate or embody some quite specific processes in Clouts’s trademark quest for immanent belonging. That said, their imagistic connotations in the poems are highly variable, and hardly susceptible to any analogical or allegorical generalisations. They are in each appearance, so to speak, site-specific.

A handful of poems from the *Collected Poems* are explicitly centred on birds: “The Feeding of Doves” (3); “The Sea and the Eagle” (9); “The Avocado Tree and the Sparrow” (21); “Driving from the Sea” (41); “Wintertime, great wintertime” (57); and “The Hawk” (72). Most often, birds are mentioned in passing, as it were, and sometimes, especially in the earlier work, obviously symbolically. In the subtler later work, overt symbolism is replaced by a more organic sense of their integration into a greater whole, or what Ken Wilber terms a “holon” (a kind of temporary or perceived aggregation or ecosystem enclosed within, and enclosing, other holons).³¹

Some birds clearly symbolise, at a conventional level, a kind of homeliness.

31 Wilber defines the holon as “an entity that is itself a *whole* and simultaneously a *part* of some other whole [...] holons within holons, in an *infinity* of probability waves” (*A Brief History of Everything*, 1996, 20). These are not dissimilar to Deleuzian “planes of consistency” or “fields of immanence” in that they possess at least four capacities: “agency and communion, self-transcendence and self-dissolution” (*Plateaus*, 244). And fascinatingly, all the above bears increasing congruence with recent molecular biology, which shows how the metaphor of Darwin’s evolutionary tree is complicated by networked activities of microbes, bacteria, viruses, fungi aggregating, borrowing, repurposing one another in “horizontal gene transfers” which are sometimes repeatable, sometimes quite novel. The “self” of an organism, then, is a “holobiont”, a seething aggregate of inter-nested multitudes of different components (see Tsing et al, *Arts of Living*).

Settling doves and pigeons, in particular, rather conventionally embody peace for Clouts. In "The Gathering" (20), a poem which celebrates unifying the disparate, "three pigeons" dig their beaks into the "folded skyblue greys" of their own feathers with "deft violence". In "What Remains" (23), "Arctic snows [...] settle like a dove". The "first pigeon/ cooing in the dusk" in "A Part of Misery" (24), is metonymic of settlement and contentment. In "Cape of Good Hope" (44), the "white birth of a dove" is indicative of a quiet gentleness, though it is still sufficient to break the "silence" of a contemplative sea. It is "pure delight" when "birds stay/ and nothing scatters" ("Knotted globes of tawny resin", 25). There is always a part of the poet's consciousness which wants only to be nested within some "broad wingfolded/ wingbeating place" ("The Grave's Cherub", 86).

Even in these fragmentary examples, quivers of disturbance or energy are palpable. So, in an apparently antithetical movement, or "line of flight", birds can frequently also embody a reaching-beyond, not in order to escape the present, but to quicken one's perceptions of it. In "The Soul in its Sleep" (34), the eagle is depicted "soaring upward clear of its mythologies", as awakening to something untrammelled by convention. In "Wat die hart van vol is" (What the heart is full of; 119), the "sparrows tingle", energising the senses. The sensory appreciation is beyond intellectual articulation: the poet reveres "many wings without a thought" in "As it Was" (32), and in "The Strong Southeaster" (16) the "hawkbirds" are "mindless". In "Such Silence" (48), the "dawn bird" sings the senses awake. "Everywhere," as Clouts states in "The Beginning" (2), "the sense must be quick to follow" the flickers of intuition and enlightenment. Birds, along with other airborne creatures like moths and flying-fish, are exemplary of the quick and fleeting.

Some instances recognise that these lines of flight out of a complacent self-hood can be a solitary business. In "The Load" (49), the "call of the starling" is "cold and lonely". "Can a bird be so lonely?" the poet asks in "The Sleeper" (83), as he ruminates on the disconcerting independence and self-containment of the woman sleeping beside him. In "Something Precious" (39), this paradox is imaged as a "bird that hovers and falls"; in perceiving the object as distinct, the poem suggests, "Something precious will escape you [...] will separate", so that "You will be only yourself". Even as the poet wishes to identify with the eagle or the hawk, the notionally separate 'self' will reassert itself: "I am not the turtledove", he realises in "Frog" (115). Separateness constantly baulks the effort

to integrate and unify: “The eye will not go in”, as Clouts puts it in “Within” (88). Yet at another, more profound level the apprehension of beings as separate seems artificial, or superficial. The “singularity” is at best “nomadic”, temporary.

As this implies, there is ever a tension between the passivity of contented contemplation and the activity of creation. Experiences of separateness conflict with intuitions of organic or ecological unity, occasioning persistent oscillations between alienation and security, between feeling isolated and feeling energised by the very search for an absorption into the other. If certain birds seem to insist on their otherness, are even threatening, there remains the possible apprehension of greater “holons”. The formerly distinct characteristics of these new aggregations are re-envisioned as

mingled as greenness is in green;
landless essences that have been

deeper than touch in touch with things
of the surface and what the surface brings

out of the solid fall
outranging any human call. (*CP*, 47)

The very use of rhyming couplets here (unusual in Clouts’s oeuvre) captures the tension between the stratifying or concretising compulsions of language and form, and the supra-human or ecological sense of the interfusion of all things and their qualities. Yet the surfaces and the distinct qualities are themselves inescapable and essential. There are suggestions here of the Blakean “fall”, a collapse *out of* the unitary but also *into* our distinctively human mode of creativity, which is also to say out of the formless or voidal and into the sharp distinctions of individualities. Clouts endeavours to resolve the paradox, not in order to wish or explain it away, but to capture its paradoxicality in a single motion. As Clouts himself expressed it, his poetic aim is “to reconstitute, to rearrange if it can, all meanings around fresh ignition points” (141). The emphasis here is, I think, more on the energising process than on a Romantic *sehnsucht* for some stabilised unitary state of transcendence.

Beyond Romanticism

Influenced by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake – not to mention his favourite, Wallace Stevens – Clouts certainly was, self-consciously so. But he professed himself suspicious of the “daring, dangerous Romantic note”, especially that of the suffering poet (in Butler & Harnett, 12). At no point does Clouts pretend that the attainment of a unitary vision of any kind – an experience of the “One Life” – is easy or irreversible, or even that it should be. He is not a romantic “nature poet” in that sense. Nor is he vapidly “mystical”. The studious materiality, the muscular effort at compression and surprise evident in almost every line of his oeuvre, is testament to that. He wrote:

I think of transcendence as inhabiting [a] raptness, that possession of the poem *by the world* [...] I have moments either of transcendence or of movement toward that transcendence, of passage into it, of definition of it [...] whatever any *line* which one tries to think of might be doing *at that time* (13; my emphasis).

Birds are exemplary exponents of that line or lines.

Deleuze and Guattari, in two of the quotations above, write of “kingdoms”, a choice of word coincidentally but appropriately evoking Clouts’s poem “Animal Kingdom”, which Brettell liked (*CP*, 76).

Spading earth
I thought of the earth. Here
and there gazelle and hog
locust and elephant
fly and frog,
collecting their light, leapt
frumped pondered and whizzed
and the river that I heard
included birdsong

Birds take their place amongst all other creatures that seem part earth, part light; the scene is at once sensually immediate and globally inclusive, projecting hitherto all-but-inconceivable plane of interrelationship, agency, and alliance. Humanness and birdness are included non-hierarchically: in a sense humanness

is “fly and frog/ pond hand stalk and loquat/ river and beak”. All, it might be said, is/are synecdoche. Hence the poet can, even as a momentarily separable entity, partake in, and be redefined by, the “lines of flight” inscribed on the world and on his mind by other entities. An example are the closing lines: “Locust locust leap with me/ water flow and mirror me.” Clouts’s language demands that we perceive these formerly divided entities within marvellously different ecologies or fields of interrelationship and interfusion.

However, such a realisation is not easily attained or guaranteed, not least because Nature, *contra* some glib Romanticism, is not unrelievedly beneficent. In “The Avocado Tree and the Sparrow” (21), the titular tree is characterised as a battlefield. The “sheens” of its leaves are “sharp, corrosive”, like plates of armour which an incursive sparrow is either confronted by or dons – or both. It is unclear at times in this early poem just what is fighting what, and I’m not convinced that the ambiguity is deliberate; but if it is an unintended confusion in the poem, it is a revealing one. At one stage it seems there is a massing against the sparrow, as if by the Zulu troops of “Cetawayo”; but it is finally the sparrow’s “gaze/ of quick command” which “sway[s] the battlefield”. He seems to enclose within himself the power of “small fibres densely steeled”.

The presence of aggressiveness in the natural world is unsurprisingly most evident in poems featuring raptors. In “The Strong Southeaster” (16), rather unspecific “hawkbirds”, which “sink on the light/ and fold their imperative wings”, have a “mindless, monumental”, hieratic air rather too reminiscent of Yeats and his Byzantium. They are an expression perhaps of a wish to leave behind the “turbulent cloud/ of brooding victors” and the “mustering gloom/ of power”. The reference to political power is clear, but it is not confined to the South African scenario; the historically well-read Clouts, with a particular penchant for the Classical era, was well aware that the dynamics of power repeated themselves in disparate epochs and locations. Nor need “power” be read as only political; the poem invites the inclusion of thought itself.

A similar yearning for some Yeatsian state of pure art is expressed more imploringly in “The Hawk” (72). Slightly reminiscent of Tennyson’s imperious eagle, the hawk on its “glimmering scythes” of wings “darkens the mountain/ darkens the field”, but also seems to offer some hope for the poet, who cries out “for a word of judgement/ lean as a blade” from a condition of threatening chaos in which “Flowers are toppling” and “the earth burbles blood”. In its detached, “darken[ing]”, even potentially lethal line of flight, “The Hawk” carries some of

the Romantics' gloomy prognostications of apocalyptic conflict. Satisfyingly ambiguous.

This echoes the use of the image of the eagle in other poems. Clearly for Clouts there is a solitariness, a sense of self-alienation in the soaring abandonment of pre-established thought-patterns, especially in the earlier work. "The Sea and the Eagle" (9), for example, is shot through with questioning, but ends with a strong foreshadowing of the confident authority of the later poems. The poet is evidently looking for a "destiny", a solidified sense of placement within the world: he envisages that the "sea" or the "eagle" might embody or direct him to this destiny. He seeks after the bird's "line of flight", its destination and its motivation, as if he might follow it somehow. The eagle is envisaged as being privy to something "conceal[ed] in thunder", as being of a primordial authority, pre-human in the depth of its history. This is not merely, however, a process of romanticised regression to some antecedent mode of being. Rather, the focus is on the present and the reformatory: the eagle is envisaged as *knowing* how the seasons have "mingl[ed] us in the flowing metre". This is an especially important image, since it implies that poetry itself, the "rising and falling" cadences of speech, are embedded in, co-existent with, and inseparable from both our own existence and that of the greater ecology. Sea and eagle are thus, in a sense, our unconscious: Clouts eventually wants not to *interpret* the surface signs of that unconscious (as he did in "The Hawk"), so much as fully to *experience* its multiform, immediate "thisness", what Duns Scotus (and Deleuze and Guattari after him) termed "haecceity". Mind, language and the processes of perception necessarily perform the task of integrating the apparently disunited objects of the world; but there is a simultaneous sense of the creative agency entering mysteriously from elsewhere. Clouts ends the poem:

Reveal it and we shall see ourselves
suddenly like a rising wing,
terribly like a swoop of water.

This is to exemplify Clouts's own manifesto: the sense "that one is not only in one's body but outside it [...] The relationship of the poet with things is this always being another" (in Butler & Harnett, 9). In many poems, the "wing" is the metaphoric vehicle of that realisation, and the expression of it better aligned in many ways with modern phenomenological perspectives than with classic Romanticism.

Great wintertime

In Clouts's poem "The Soul in its Sleep" (*CP*, 34), "the eagle soar[s] upwards clear of the mythologies". This is as clear an expression of what Deleuze and Guattari call "deterritorialisation" – moving away from established ideals or conventions or "territories" – as one might wish for. But what new "territory" or "reterritorialization" does the poem represent, temporarily stabilised in print as it is? Clouts himself wrote, not of a romantic transcendence, but rather of a "moving towards" without a "definite object" (Butler & Harnett, 13): such "objects" as exist reside only in the metaphor. Deleuze and Guattari write:

For both statements and desires, the issue is never to reduce the unconscious or to interpret it or to make it signify according to [an hieratic or genealogical] model. The issue is to *produce the unconscious*, and with it new statements, different desires (*Plateaus*, 19; emphasis in original).

"Producing the unconscious" may be said to be the central concern of perhaps the most successful of Clouts's bird-centred poems, though it was not published in his lifetime: "Wintertime, great wintertime" (*CP*, 57-8). In this poem, the speaker conducts a somewhat wry "conversation" with a "glossy bird", probably a wagtail. At first the relationship is dualistic, almost confrontational: the bird's "tapping tail upbraid[s]" the poet, perhaps for his very sense of separateness. He in turn "mutter[s] like a witch upon it", as if evoking a magical incantation. Obviously Clouts is not advocating necromancy: rather he pursues a method of association akin to magical symbolism. In our rationalistic era, this may be a poetic experience "that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel. Who has not known the violence of these animal sequences, which uproot one from one's humanity, if only for an instant...?" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Plateaus*, 240). From this upheaval emerge lines that, like examples we have already seen, in themselves form the sense of a multitudinous, newly aggregated world, one without name or predetermining terminology, a "body without organs":

‘Drum drum the sodden world
till all the drops go flying.
Little tail, good
Governor Conclusion, drum
the acid core of worms,

the plateau of desertions,
absence, lies, confusion.’

A new world seems to be drummed into being here. What was once “sodden” is made dry, is cleansed of its inner corruptions; the droplets fly outwards into new territories. Ironically, the “acid core” of the world’s corruptions are themselves the stimulus behind the drumming; only the recognition of abuses can evoke a counter-movement, a destratification, a movement towards a new “Conclusion”. The presence of “desertions” and “lies” sounds negative, but they might also be seen as vectors or expressions of rebellious renewal, challenge and escape. The “core” and “plateau” are the territories from which new movements inevitably take off. So the bird’s feathers “troop” or parade “the spectrum/ moist presumptive stream” – another neat encapsulation of deterritorialisation.³² More importantly, there is “not a flounce/ of supernatural phrase/ abolishing as bird its actual nature”. There results neither a glib religious appropriation of the bird into an allegoric realm of merely human significance, nor a denial of the haecceity of the bird-as-bird. Aesthetic appreciation makes for an ethical humbling:

Freak fire and snow
some birds are very beautiful
and this bird doubly so,
to miserable mind repentance brought.
O muddy mind of sorrow, brace your soil. (58)

The recognition of beauty in the instance, abrupt as a freak snowfall, engenders “repentance”. Repentance from what? The next lines imply that it is the separation of “mind” from “soil” that has been the problem: the bird has pointed the way towards some sense of reunification, a renewed recognition that the mind at bottom *is* soil, “muddy” with its own delusions. Moreover, “sorrow”, like the lies, greed and confusions, proves to be the ground of renewal. It is the stimulus to “brace your soil”, to recharge yourself with energy as well as support the very earth from which you came. It strives towards a renewed

32 Another echo, too, I suspect, of Blake’s famous couplet from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way,/ Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your senses five?” (G. Keynes, ed. *The Complete Blake*, OUP, 1972, 150).

symbiosis (“brace” here carries the echo of “embrace”).

Even in its diminutiveness this bird – or, more precisely, the poet’s attentiveness to the bird – is integral to the greater rhythms of life:

It was the bird whose scope
of beams and darkness pressed
the axial rhythm’s millionth part of change. (58)

Whatever else this fantastically compressed last line might imply, it involves a both a spectrum (*scope*) of complexity and the persistence of dualisms (*beams* and *darknesses*), both a certain predictability (*rhythm*) and endless, unpredictable *change*. The poet, Clouts said, adopts “complexity for his own and know[s] himself as more complex than anything he will ever see. He can give the name complex and multiple [...] and incomprehensible to the things that are” (in Butler & Harnett, 37).

The closing section of “Wintertime, great wintertime” enacts just such heterogeneity, such mobile crossing of thresholds, such deliberate escaping of self and of theory, such irreducible marriages of points into fresh symbioses. Upon this recognition, paradoxically, a profoundly true and engaged ethics can be effected.

I felt the spinning drops that stage the world’s
unaxiomed body’s hungry entrances.
What I am not I am. The core expounds
the beating of a heart. Unmagical,
into this mud I carry the morning star
thrown with time’s tragedy
to glitter like an angry stone.
The beating of a heart! It binds that stone.
I wept for all betrayals, greed and loss. (58)

“What I am not I am.” This sounds evasively paradoxical, even mystical, but I think can be explained in materialist terms of mud and feathers, too. There are two kinds of “I” here. There is the limited self of the bounded body, the ego-centric sense of selfhood which is both real and illusory – illusory because it pretends to exclude all of the Chaosmos which effectively *does* constitute its

being (that which it is not). And there is also a different, wider, integrative “I”, embracing “soil” and cosmos. It is an “I” somewhat like Freya Mathews’s conception of the “ecological self”, which is like a temporarily stabilised ripple in the onrushing, endlessly interlocking waves of energy that constitute the universe, and is therefore a “function” of those waves. Only in a severely limited sense is it a discrete entity (Mathews, 108). There is, as Clouts’s phrasing indicates, nothing “magical” about this: it is simply a recognition that “time’s tragedy” is for us, for our peculiar consciousness, to have dragged the cosmic and illuminative (the “morning star”) down into the mud of illusion and disillusion (betrayal, greed and loss, the rationalistic and unimaginative), where it smoulders like an “angry stone”. Yet that stone also “glitter[s]”; it is a “heart”, is *our* heart. Again, this fall is grounds for “hungry” regeneration, for the fresh recognition of beauty, and hence for the act of weeping. The sorrow arising from recognising tragedy, it can be argued, is the emotional basis for ethical action. And the tragedy, I think Clouts is urging, is our habitual stuckness in separateness.

Overcoming such stuckness is perhaps the most profound ethical imperative of our time. We collectively have to challenge accepted environmental norms and modes, mapping lines of flight into new solutions. Birds, in Clouts’s poetry, embody and enact just those complementary lines, the “lines of flight” of the mind, winged with thought. In a sense, I think he has obeyed Deleuze and Guattari’s injunction, producing in each poem “a small plot of new land”:

Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. (*Plateaus*, 161)



Chapter Six

Douglas Livingstone and the ecotone

Loren Eiseley in his wonderful book *The Star Thrower* relates how, walking along a beach one evening, he encountered a man diligently picking up stranded starfish and hurling them back into deeper sea. The “star-thrower” admitted that this was quixotic, but he simply could not leave them to die. I can’t remember if he – or Eiseley – considered the lives *lost* as a result of his “rescues”: the microbiota invisibly embedded in the sands, tiny carnivorous worms, scavenging crabs and spiral-shelled plough molluscs who were being deprived of vital fleshy detritus.

Douglas Livingstone also writes of a beached starfish, a “minute, arid artefact” whose unusual six-pointed structure reminds him of the Star of David, of the Holocaust, and of all the world’s “countless starfish, children/ with no historian” (*Ruthless Fidelity* [hereafter *RF*], 294). It was typical of a poet who could write as compassionately about humans as about animals. He could see them as intricately co-determining the fate of a common ecosystem. Unlike Alan James, looking for a primordial taproot into a spiritualised ecological sensitivity in an ancient animism, or a Roy Campbell seeking a rough but glorious avatar of Darwinian power, Livingstone viewed our relations with the natural world literally through the lens of a microscope.

Uniquely among the poets explored in this book, he was scientifically trained. Born in Malaya in 1932, he qualified as a microbiologist. After a stint in the government laboratories in Salisbury, in the then Rhodesia, he forged a long career measuring pollution levels at a series of coastal stations off the Natal coast. All the while he was writing poetry, dense and accomplished and voluminous, as attested by the now-standard collection, the 560-page *A Ruthless Fidelity* (2004). That title, culled from one of his poems, neatly encapsulates the incisive, truth-seeking attention he paid to the world around him and to the craft of poetry. For this he was seen as easily South Africa’s most substantive poet, winning the CNA Prize for his *Selected Poems* in 1984. The range of subjects, verse-forms and voices is formidable, his output hugely respected if not universally liked. Lean, tanned

and forthright, he had a certain (dare one say, Roy Campbell-like?) swashbuckling air of sinewy machoism; some feminist readers have detected a certain misogyny lurking in his oft-expressed adoration of women. He died suddenly of stomach cancer in 1996.

A great deal of evidence notwithstanding, the ecological dimension of his work has mystifyingly escaped much attention until fairly recently. The compilers of the encyclopaedic *Complete Guide to South African Literature in English since 1945*, for example (Cornwell, 125-7), note his regular depictions of Africa's wild animals, but fail to contextualise these within Livingstone's growing, biology-informed concern for planetary ecological health. Even in discussing his key final volume, *A Littoral Zone* (1991), despite that concern being patently its primary theme, they scarcely mention the infusions of science, and highlight the volume's "metaphysical" dimension instead. Michael Chapman – ubiquitous compiler, encyclopaedist and commentator that he is – has written about and interviewed Livingstone over many years, including a short critical monograph published in 1981. This was obviously too early to include the more ecologically-orientated final work. Mariss Stevens, in a bold and grounded Master's thesis and some published articles, has explored the ecology aspect most thoroughly, taking Chapman somewhat to task for his (in her view) misreadings. Ian Glenn (a literary critic) and Ed Rybicki (a biologist) also teamed up in 2006 to field an article on Livingstone's treatment of those "two cultures", science and poetry. Most recently, Chapman has published an idiosyncratic overview of his somewhat combative relationship with Livingstone, including snippets of sundry conversations and interviews. Its title, *Green in Black and White Times* (2016), indicates that ecology is finding its proper place in assessments of Livingstone, but the book is not centrally a critical work. There is, I think, more to be said. To that end, in what follows, I will focus on *A Littoral Zone*.

In this volume, Livingstone most thoroughly integrated his scientific work into poetry of a tough, knotty, often raunchy, sometimes delightfully satirical kind. (His satire is most often slyly tongue-in-cheek, unlike Roy Campbell's cutting seriousness.) He depicts himself setting out in his little Cortina car "loaded with boxes/ of wide-mouthed glass sampling bottles,/ aluminium racks of plastic ones/ and a sampling stick that clacks its jaws. /To horse!" (*RF*, 262). Later, "A sea sample gets hooked, grappled/ with ancient tricks through practiced scoops,/ flicks of the wrist, the excess spilled" (*RF*, 287). The sampling of seawater at the sundry "stations" provides a framework for poems on numerous subjects

in a variety of forms, from compact arguments to surrealist mythic narratives. Although during the turbulent 1970s and '80s, when the struggle against apartheid was uppermost in the national consciousness, Livingstone was like Sydney Clouts accused by some of being inadequately politicised, there is plenty in this volume to show that he was fully apprised of black writing and the historic impact of national politics on the local, such as the plight of impoverished transients. Yet his ecological vision is uppermost, covering housing estates, trash delivered by floods, love for women, beached and living creatures from bacteria to whales, milieux from collapsing hotels to caves once inhabited by the San. I pick out just some threads from this extraordinarily rich and gritty trove.

Science in/and poetry

Livingstone regarded science and poetry as parallel means of reaching the truth about the world. His science imbricated the poems, almost literally at a microbial level. Hence a poem entitled "Isotopes" captures aspects of our separate-but-interconnected existence, and he would characterise humanity, overwhelming its supporting environment, as the "negatio bacillus". Collecting a water sample, he has to assume it contains molecules from a man's body floating just offshore.

At the other end of the spectrum: the galactic. Livingstone was of a generation to experience the excitement of the 1969 moon landings. Like many, he could view the stunning photographs of Earth from so far away that it became visible for what it is: a "bright blue cell" suspended in space, vulnerable and sole. The same photographs energised James Lovelock, the planetary scientist who has written a series of books arguing that Earth has in effect become a self-adjusting organism that can maintain the conditions for life – a concept he called Gaia, after the Greek goddess. This sounded too anthropomorphic for some scientists, but it evidently appealed to Livingstone's poetic or mythic side, as he invoked the figure more than a few times. He made it his job, he said, to "heal the planet" in the face of human depredations, stupidity, waste and pollution. As early as 1985, he painted a grim picture of a probable future of overpopulation and hunger:

We're presiding over our own destruction. We spew into our atmosphere the climate-altering pollutant, CO₂. The consequences? We'll see increases in extreme weather conditions, more allergens, decreases in food production,

increases in food- and water-related diseases, decreases in coarse-grained crops. Added to climate change, we have other human-related impacts on the planetary ecosystem. Deforestation. A combination of acidification of the oceans and the warming of seawater will lead to a loss of fish, coral reefs and biodiversity. [A]ll this will lead to displaced populations, conflict over scarce resources and wide-scale social breakdown. [...] I can visualise a world of isolated fortresses of scientists, medics, antibiotic factories, blood transfusions, transplanted organs, the pursuit of immortality, special foods and so on. Well-armed fortresses, protected by lasers, or worse, and vast plains between the fortresses of struggling, copulating, breathing, choking, starving, dying, diseased human beings, launching their futile attacks on these privileged excrescences. (Chapman, *Green*, 117-8)

Darwinian and hyperbolic, perhaps, but also prescient. Depressingly, forty years later, the warnings from scientists remain much the same, Livingstone's scenario as likely as ever. He was right to feel less than sanguine about his chances of successfully healing the planet: echoing Roy Campbell, he repeatedly compared himself to Don Quixote, tilting at windmills, nevertheless doing what he felt he had to do.

A third branch of science with which Livingstone was intimately familiar was evolutionary theory. He could not but believe in its essential tenets, even if it put him at odds with a lingering religiosity. This was encapsulated, for example, in the poem entitled "An Evolutionary Nod to God". Livingstone hedges his bets:

Perhaps creationists are nearly right:
 an enigmatic principle formed cells
 – evolving scientific law by night –
 informed with more ahead than heavens or hells.

Somehow, from "slime-flecks", free-will develops, though it "incurs some debts". The "debts get paid", but the body retains primordial traces:

Still, it [free-will] evades the puppet-master's role.
 Far from its image, vestiges in me
 recall a time I once breathed in its sea. (*RF*, 271)

In “A Darwinian Preface”, the first poem of *A Littoral Zone* (RF, 260), he broaches the idea that perhaps “the sea indeed did suckle you”, a thought that gives him strength to resist the “nocturnal terrorisms” of competitive, even murderous life, which he compresses to “The crab, the clot, the muzzle or the knife”. One can still anticipate love, be welcomed by the dawn, feel blessed. In the end, “There is no help for it. Best buckle to.”

A conventional view of the Darwinian “entangled bank” as a disorderly riot of “survival of the fittest” wrestled with his sense that there had to be some ordering laws underpinning the miraculous creation and maintenance of life. For himself, he called it the “Creative Principle” – and with a certain impishness characterised it as feminine and courted its improbable mysticism. Repeatedly he expressed a sense of limitations in purely ratiocinative science. In a much-quoted essay, “Science and Truth”, he asked “Is the ‘truth’ attainable?”, and concluded:

It is possible we have to reconcile our pursuit of scientific truth – verifying every step of the way, imagining it, longing for it, even dreaming of it, spurring ourselves on with the current theory or available ratiocinative device, alert always for the dissolution of rigidities whose components re-form into new realities which will dissolve in their turn – with never actually attaining it. Einstein’s observation: “The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the source of all true art and science”, affords not only comfort but enjoyment while the day to day proper business of science ensues, i.e.: seeking after truth, however evasive the truth happens to be. (Quoted in Stevens, 35)

Repeatedly in the poetry, he probes for a “psychic” or “mystic” *meaning* beyond the scientific terminologies of observation. An example is the poem, “The genetic blueprint in roses, etc”:

not law but its consequence,
not organ but impulse,
not synapse but memory,
not cells but their function,
not atoms but their temper,
not extent but intent:

a text of the rose entire. (*RF*, 165)

He felt, perhaps, there was no other way of justifying humans' – his own – strange capacity for compassion towards non-human creatures and even towards an impersonal and unresponsive environment. In a number of poems Livingstone expresses that improbably sacralising compassion, most famously in the much-anthologised earlier poem “Gentling a Wildcat”. In his culminating volume, *A Littoral Zone*, he reprises the gesture, mercifully slitting the throat of a beached and injured leatherback turtle.

Such creatures – as for many southern African poets – are unique markers of belonging: writing knowledgeably and intimately of wild animals (or birds or plants) in a sense fortifies one's sense of rootedness. Wildcats, elephants, cobras, giraffes, turtles – these and many more entangle Livingstone in the specifics of place and emplacement. This – to take just one strand of our most multi-faceted poet – will be the burden of the rest of this chapter: the idea of a *bioregion* as a locus of belonging and being. In this regard, the setting of *A Littoral Zone* – the intertidal zones stretching north and south of Durban – were the place, the bioregion, that he knew best and explored most fully through poetry. It also presents some unique challenges, not just to a secure sense of belonging, but to the concept of the bioregion itself.

Littoral zones

For Livingstone, the littoral zone is the interface of extremes, of life and death and the multiple interchanges between them. It is traversed by serpents and bodies; it delivers both cosmic delights and grinding disappointments; courageous insights and confrontations with human uncaring. Littoral zones both sandy and rocky support unique ecosystems, at their richest crammed with species of bacteria, algae, kelps and crabs, shellfish and octopi, urchins and birds which can subsist under no other conditions. At this singular seam between the geological and the marine, there seems on the face of it little reason not to apply the term “bioregion”. After all, many scientists have made their living studying estuarine mudflat or tidal pool ecosystems, and would unhesitatingly assert that their biological uniqueness and levels of species-endemism are no less localised, worthy or diverse than those of, say, a tropical forest or the unique Cape Floral Kingdom fynbos biome.

As almost every observer of the littoral has noted, however, it is also a zone of particularly dramatic dynamism: the relentless crashing of waves on coral, rock or sand, the diastole-systole rhythms of tides, the erosion and infinitesimal rebuilding of beaches and dunes. It has become a widespread symbol of the common fragility of natural and human affairs. (We have seen N H Brettell, Ruth Miller and Sydney Clouts all touching on the implications of the shore's liminality.) Laurie Ricou considers the intertidal zone "an ideal metaphor for a place in constant transition [...] a place of deposition, of layering, of a mix of communities, of crevices and hidden pools"(quoted in Mason, 79). Though shoreline conditions are extreme, they raise the difficulty of defining or retaining the concept of a bioregion more generally. Even in relatively isolatable systems, what we all now take as a truism – that ecology *is* dynamism – any distinctiveness, stasis or balance ever attained or discerned is necessarily temporary, contingent and relative. The turbulence of the littoral only makes unavoidably obvious what holds for all the natural world.

It nevertheless often seems to make good sense to see the bioregion as a "useful territorial container" (Aberley, 31) with more or less discernible boundaries. Some areas wear the epithet more easily than others: an oasis, a patch of isolated forest, even a river catchment system. This perception allows one to find oneself "at home" in the given area, to exercise what Kirkpatrick Sale has termed *querencia* (Sale, 3) and Peter Berg, in his founding statement of bioregionalism, "reinhabitation" (Berg, 1). One's very sense of selfhood may be predicated on the comfortable familiarity with certain species of tree, animal or grass, their colours and sounds and textures, together ineffably constitutive of the place. Berg originally pointed out – and this has remained a staple of the bioregional literature – that the bioregion is definable by both natural and cultural elements, is both "a geographic terrain and a terrain of consciousness". In "natural" terms, he further defined the bioregion as exhibiting "a continuous geographic terrain and includ[ing] a particular climate, local aspects of seasons, landforms, watersheds, soils, and native plants and animals". In cultural terms, Berg reverts to the "ecologically adaptive cultures of early inhabitants", evidently in contrast to the "catastrophic effects on Earth's biosphere due to human activities since the inception of the industrial era"(2). The echoes with Livingstone are obvious.

This notion of the bioregion-as-container, or "traditional" bioregionalism, has been widely critiqued recently. Environmental critic Lawrence Buell notes that "Traditional writing about place tends to interest itself especially in

bounded areas of small size” and that such eco-localism is likely to be most “concerned about countering threats to the bounded holistic community from the outside.” This is changing, so that “what especially differentiates modern bioregionalism, be it rural or urban, from traditional regionalism is the sense of vulnerability and flux [...] the increasing sense that regions remain permeable to shock waves potentially extending worldwide” (Buell, 77, 81). Or as Mitchell Thomashow asks:

How does a bioregional vision accommodate the bifurcation of economic globalization and political decentralization, the instability and dislocation of ecological and cultural diasporas, the elusiveness of pluralistic identities and multiple personas? (121)

Don Alexander similarly expresses doubts about the possibility of simplistically correlating natural areas with cultural units, even those of autochthonous people, let alone today’s globalising cultures. There is simply no one cultural presence – Bushman, Xhosa, white settler, or any other – coterminous with natural features. Nor is such indeterminacy merely a ploy of poets or writers: a standard ecology textbook states: “The safest statement we can make about community boundaries is that probably they do not exist. [...] The ecologist is usually better employed looking at the ways in which communities grade into each other” (Begon et al, 478). Consequently, bioregionalists find it increasingly difficult coherently to harbour utopian “harmony”- or “balance”-driven programmes. Some “soft” version of bioregionalism, founded on intimate local knowledges, may yet prove essential to saving our environments.

I suggest that the concept of the *ecotone* may be a more useful and accurate one than the container-like “bioregion”. The ecotone may be defined as the “zone of transition [...] having a set of characteristics uniquely defined by space and time scales, and by the strength of the interactions between adjacent ecological systems” (di Castri; quoted in Mason, 4). Within such a meeting-ground, “edge-effect” prevails, in a diversity of species that exceeds those of the separate ecosystems. Further, rather than being a mosaic of putatively independent and exclusionary units, any biotic environment is effectively *all* edge-effect – ecotones “all the way down”. This conception of environment, especially when natural and human-cultural influences mesh, conflict and cross-fertilise, has rather different ethical implications for anyone claiming to *belong* in

a chosen locale and wishing to defend or improve it. It is not so much that belonging vanishes or becomes incoherent; rather that its expressions and motivations are processual rather than statically regional, integrative rather than defensive, progressive rather than backward-looking, global as well as local.

A kind of love affair

Douglas Livingstone's poetry both exemplifies and explores these difficulties, and charts a way through them, albeit a rather unsettling one. For two decades he "sallied in/ rapt attendance on the sea's health" (*RF*, 299), measuring water-pollution levels at a series of selected stations. It would not be too much to assert that he conducted something of a love-affair with the intertidal zone. Often he wrote of the sea itself as feminine, encountered real women in ambiguous coastal situations, figured love itself as oceanic, and vice versa. In his play for voices, *The Sea My Winding Sheet* (*RF*, 123-34), he figures himself in a sense as the Titan Adamastor, as related by Camoens in *The Lusiads*, doomed in his love for the nymph Thetis. It is all perhaps rather artificially over-wrought; but the point is that the whole affair unfolds in the intertidal zone. "Tidelines", from the 1975 volume *A Rosary of Bone*, is just one of many possible examples in which human love, tidal rhythms and poetic lines counterpoise and metaphorically cross-inform, indeed partake in a single oceanic reality:

A wild swan's down
drifts on his mouth.
A wave curls warmly
on the stem of his heart.
Human life a tale begun,
spelled and ended
on coverlets where
sutured the lovers cleave.
The world has ever
spied on women, imagining
bodies yielding
to riders; and from the high
windows of poets
waves are no different. (*RF*, 177-8)

It is utopian, perhaps, and poem after poem expresses the complex difficulties of relationship on the “cardiac coast” of our embodied existence, the “nights of rage and acrimonious love” figured as a “violent ebb and flood” (“And Now”; *RF*, 151).

As the discussion above indicates, it’s doubtful whether in *A Littoral Zone* Livingstone can be said to writing of a bioregion at all. To characterise the collection as being the exploration of an *ecotone* I think makes better sense of it. His numbered measuring-stations remained fixed – the volume includes a map which sets them out, as nodes around which most of the poems are written – but in between, all is in flux. and his work, literally at the microscopic level, exemplifies the attentive “miniaturisation” which, in Jonathan Bate’s formulation, best makes loving a place possible. In *Song of the Earth* Bate reworks Gaston Bachelard thus: “the more attuned I am as I miniaturize the world, the better I dwell upon the earth” (161). On the broader scale, too, sea and love are constant metaphors for one another in Livingstone’s oeuvre. This is just one indication of his feelings for the place, unbounded though it intrinsically is. Like many bioregionalists, he also eschewed provincial, national and other political borders, and indeed used biological scales and continuities as a critical lever against them. He would have approved, along with Lawrence Buell, that the “new environmentalist writing and criticism is also always in some sense a post-nationalist persuasion” (Buell, 81).

Livingstone had no illusions about the difficulties he faced, though he was not unsuccessful in helping improve water quality along that increasingly built-up coastline (his strip is today lined virtually end-to-end with hotels, casinos and upmarket holiday homes). Like Eiseley’s star-thrower, he overtly characterised his local crusade as quixotic, even “futile,/ scientifically delivered blows at sullage,/ against the republics of ignorance and apathy,/with bust lance, flawed shield,/ lamed steed of action” (*RF*, 263). In an inadvertent but telling congruence with Eiseley, he included this epigraph from *Don Quixote* in *A Littoral Zone*: “I have always heard, Sancho, that doing good to base fellows is like throwing water into the sea” (260). To the degree that he permitted himself hope for fruitful change, he was a romantic, but in a quite severely unspiritual vein; hence Mariss Stevens characterises him as a “Romantic materialist” (Stevens, “Symbiosis”). She also calls him an “eco-pessimist”: Livingstone abhorred much of human behaviour as grimly destructive, likely to leave no more than “A legacy of dust, and no more green” (“Premonition”; *RF*, 498).

But he never allowed this prognosis to curb his energetic campaign to do

what he could. He considered the South African coastline a microcosm of the country, and the country a microcosm of the planet. The planetary perspective also rescues his poetry from accusations of narrow or exclusionary provincialism. Indeed, the poems, despite being so knowledgeable about and redolent of their places of origin, defy the traditional models of bioregionalism in at least three main ways. First, they are constantly intersected by the incursion of extra-littoral, even global influences, both natural and human-cultural, both temporal and spatial. Second, Livingstone evinces little interest in utopian schemes of balance and harmony; his imagery is characteristically of unstable motility, evolutionary in its scope and assumptions. Even the body, which he repeatedly describes in terms suited to the bioregion, almost as a bioregion in itself, is porous and only partly integrated. Third, he is as interested in human presences (including literary and imaginative ones) as in the natural. Indeed, as most bioregionalists now recognise, humans have to be counted as integral to “the community” of biota as well, with all their destructive foibles. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore each of these aspects in more detail.

Intersections

Firstly, then, Livingstone’s poems consistently show how the littoral zone, virtually by definition, is not sealed off from its adjoining regions – ocean and land. He would doubtless agree with biologist Joseph P Dudley that “bioregional parochialism [...] places great limitations on our ability to comprehend and communicate the pervasive effects of anthropogenic and ecological phenomena of continental and global significance” (Dudley, 1332). The poet himself is a node of coalescence: “Drinking, I drink/ old mythologies – / men, gods, strange beasts/ the stones, slaked bottles, seas” (*RF*, 122).

On the one hand, from the ever-suggestively fluid resources of the sea, food arrives for the beach residents, bodies wash up alongside flotsam from passing ships, legends are imported on the back of global maritime trade. More profoundly, Livingstone regards the sea as our ultimate evolutionary origin: “vestiges in me/ recall a time I once breathed in [evolution’s] sea” (*RF*, 271). The interstitial zone of “Haunted Estuary” is a birth-place of coiling mists “where river & sea/ the fresh & the saline/ rehearse in the air/ the grapplings of cubs” (264). In “Address to a Patrician at Station 8” (277), Livingstone apostrophizes the coelocanth, a species which has survived virtually unchanged in deep-sea

trenches for millions of years. The final stanza contrasts the astonishing persistence of this species with the makeshift nature of almost everything else, but also celebrates a profound ancestral interconnection:

What awes me – fish from long ago –
is not the muddying of your chaps
when waves clawed 200 metres up
or below today’s makeshift shores
nor your changeless chinless lineage,
but your fathers squirting on eggs
to sire everyone I know.

He has a reverent sense of the mysterious depths of time and space embodied in the ocean, the “great menstruum/ solvent and transmuter/ of men and ships” (294). Against its immensity the poet is “a mere excrescence/ on a giant’s spine dreamed up/ by seas still veiled to fettered man” (299). If in the ocean we began, then language must have begun there, too. In an earlier poem, “Aspects”, Livingstone envisages “a tropic sea-floor/ beyond divers, submarines/ the nosings of bathyscaphes” where “On a patch of clean sand/ both god the father and his son/ have shyly signed their names”, an originary tablet as it were “where Earth’s/ old volcanic basalt floods/ quietly made some words” (373-4). Our own art is analogous or derivative, serious but not to be taken too seriously; so he wryly toasts his own poetic *métier* in “Libation to the Geoid, Station 23” (307):

Here’s to the sea in its restive quest
intent on drowning land;
even the saddest poem’s a jest
writ on the ebb-tide’s sand.

Repeatedly, Livingstone figures the advent of both life and death, of consciousness itself, as a fraught transition across the foreshore from ocean to land, “the mind/ groping its way, hand over hand,/ north to murderous oceans of sand”. Section II of the poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake”(269) depicts another creature crawling across the beach, apparently fruitlessly:

Baked dry by the sun, the stiff black snake
 forms a parched question-mark between
 highwater-mark and the dunes.
 Eden was ever too far for the crawling back.

The littoral zone represents nothing so strongly as the infirmity of Edenic or utopian ideals. In one poem, “Eland about Station 17” (295), Livingstone valorises the lives of “symbiotic” San or Bushman peoples, whose rock art he discovers in a hidden cave. But he decides to tell no one about it, partly out of respect, but also because that autochthonous world is no longer retrievable. Mostly, the littoral embodies the improbability of ever attaining either a settled environment or a reformed human nature:

The approximation to justice,
 the perfectibility of man,
 the conservation of beauty,
 the final attainment of truth
 are salients that ever evade us. (265)

Puzzling at the meaning of life and thought’s ephemerality – and of death itself – is a persistent theme in Livingstone’s oeuvre. In “Bad Run at King’s Rest” (289) a beached turtle, “shell split by an errant propellor-blade” lies dying, tormented by gulls, urchins and trophy-hunters. The speaker, “asking pardon, cut[s] the leathery throat”, and appeals “dumbly” for meaning “to the incoming tides”. No meaning is forthcoming. Similarly, when encountering a beached dolphin, the poet tries in vain to return it to the sea: the bystanders to whom he appeals for help want only to kill it with “a long and rusted bayonet” – an article of war. It is his own impulse to compassion which puzzles the poet. Clumsily he tries to persuade himself that dolphins and humans alike are carnivores, caught up in the evolutionary cycles, and perhaps “dolphins are no more/ than raw fish-dogs of the sea; or bait”, the well-known smile an anthropomorphic illusion. On the verge of this paradox the poet feels similarly helpless, stranded, dying, alien.

The paradox is that the erratic progressions of evolution, its “rash chromosomal loops” and “random nightmares” (18), have somehow bred in us sympathies, sentiments and fears arising in part from our consciousness of death. These feelings are ever a source of tension between accepting that we are ‘natural’

organisms, and our ephemeral glorying in those cultural productions with which we attempt to assuage or explain our lot. In “Coronach at Cave Rock” (282), the poet discovers a “small, silent piece” of driftwood, “the holster-stock of a machine-pistol issued/ to U-boat crews”. The piece bears the name A VON WEBERN – not the musician of that name, the poet assumes, but the coincidence sends him off on a tightly interwoven meditation on the meanings of music and the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust, above all on how they could possibly coexist. The poet fondly imagines that *this* A von Webern was a mere conscript and, like him, “an indignant pacifist” – but he is also then obliged to envisage his own end, his own “crumbling essence drowned in blood or water”.

On the one hand, the sea delivers up life itself, death, and the material for paradoxical meditations on human origins. On the other hand, the urban landscapes of the immediate hinterland also impinge on the littoral zone. A number of poems in *A Littoral Zone* relate trips to or from the shoreline, some labelled “traffic interludes”. The landward side of the ecotone is governed by a highly mechanized, mobile, globally networked culture. As Leonard Lutwack has pointed out, the “quality of a place in literature is subtly determined by the manner in which a character arrives at it, moves within it, and departs from it” (quoted in Love, 111). “Starting Out” (*RF*, 261-3), for example, is a detailed narrative of driving out from the city of Durban to the measuring-stations, the early morning streets all but empty. As dawn rises and the suburbs thin, the poet notes “stacked heaps of concrete lumber,/ the high-rise cabinets where more folk are filed”. The press of those bureaucratically anonymous “millions” is suffocating, rendering his work all but “futile”. There is, however, a recognition that the urban and natural are intricately interlinked. The urban environs are described in marine metaphors: “Gnarled leaves” are “like keloidal crustaceans/ crabbed in sight and sound”; a prostitute is “dolphin-dusky”.

On the beaches themselves the “sullage” of those millions is inescapable. In “The Christmas Chefs of Station 1A” (265), post-party “mess on the sand [is] incredible”, prompting the gloomy prognostications on the elusiveness of human perfectibility quoted earlier. In “Reflections at Sunkist” (266), the “paper cups, the empty tins ... a silver slice of mirror”, “Monday’s debris from Sunday’s crowd”, makes it hard to “face the shattered sea uncowed”. And in “Scourings at Station 19” (298), floods have washed down inland detritus, from sheets of tin to carcasses – but on one peak of rubbish “a roughed-up bantam”, screeching out a “fractious challenge”, reaffirming life. A wry self-portrait, no doubt. Shame

at human carelessness prompts an excursion into the nature of madness, couched as memories of an insane asylum. These ruminations end with the poet turning to the sea for renewal: “the brain [is] as untameable as any ocean”, he says, and though a “cauterized synapse” might shrivel and die, “it could be some cerebral referee/ clicks on new relays to spark in that sea”.

Body as bioregion

That tentatively optimistic figuring of the brain as oceanic and self-healing brings us to the second focus: the body as bioregion. It is striking how often Livingstone returns to the yearning, hurting body as an emanation, almost, of the spaces within which it moves. At best the body feels like a temporary habitation, “little but a glove/ stretched from metatarsals to neocortex/ on a stiffening frame” (260). But it is intrinsically heterogeneous: the boundedness of skin and the autonomy of ‘self’ are really superficial and temporary “mirages” (291). In fact, as Livingstone wrote,

Each of us is a walking universe of complexly disparate worlds, continents and seas, with immense and differing populations, all organized together into some sort of functioning coherence with the single inherent determination (if we are sane) to preserve life and what is left of our planet. (Quoted in Stevens, 57)

The poem “A Tide in the Affairs of Station 18” (*RF*, 297) sharply explores the paradoxical “inherent determination[s]” of love and survival. The “affairs” of the poet’s body are envisaged as a tidal system caught between restraint, attainment and allure. A man is both “Cool Jekyll” and “manic Hyde”, as two-faced as the littoral zone itself. Man’s “obsessions collide/ with self-possessed coasts forever anointed/ with his ditherings, his slimes, his ebbs and flows”. On the one hand he is a “hunter-killer”, on the other “fouled up by sublimities”; and sometimes it seems that only his rampant, evolutionary sexual drive is “durable and permanent as any tide”. This is to see love as analogous to, or an extension of, what Livingstone elsewhere – most unscientifically – discerned as a “Creative Principle” in the universe (Stevens, 81). Yet there is a hint that this too will pass, or at least our consciousness of it will.

The ephemeral nature of the human body is most vividly depicted in “Cells

at Station 11” (*RF*, 287), in which death, interconnection at the molecular level, and incursion on the littoral zone from outside, simultaneously intersect. The poem describes the poet finding “a blackened corpse” tumbling sluggishly in the surf, “the sea unsure/ about relinquishment”. He dutifully takes his water sample as usual, aware that his microscope might well reveal cells that have drifted in from the rotting body. This prompts a meditation (drawing on the research of Lynn Margulis) on the cellular and molecular foundations of our life:

Billion-year-old invaders
 – the silent mitochondria –
 propel our mobile towers, shared cells
 sparking, colonized by vandals:
 a fifth column of DNA
 in interstellar sequences,
 bland in their promiscuity.

Like the littoral itself, our very consciousness seems under siege, almost at war with itself. To consider the way in which, at this molecular level of blindly “interned energies”, “life pump[s] through us anyhow”, is to seriously question our notions of “autonomy”. We only “think we choose”. Yet this view has a curious ethical outcome: “Woe will betide, betimes, the man/ who kills his brother”, or burns him, for he “burns shared cells”. To injure another is to injure oneself. Furthermore, to the extent that we are all “interstellar”, made up from and subtly interchanging common physical materials, we are “bound lovers under the sun”, all alike “lolling there in an unchecked sea”. In short, the body itself is more an ecotone than a bioregion, a nexus of “connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities” (Deleuze and Guattari, 161). The body’s sense of coherence and autonomy is illusory, its pretensions, in the final analysis, touchingly absurd.

Everywhere along this littoral, humans and their endeavours, though ineluctably present in (mostly) deleterious effects, are described as transitory. Even so massive an enterprise as a whaling station is now abandoned, “shipwrecked” (*RF*, 288). At a number of points in the collection, hotels are figured as icons of transience. Though their inhabitants seem often decayed to the point of indifference, Livingstone acutely observes both their touristic dependence on, and subjection to, the natural forces of the littoral. In the crumbling “Beachfront

Hotel at Station 5" (272), the rails are "salt-stained", the stairs "sand-crunching", the banisters "crab-clawed", as if the environment is about to recolonise it. At the same time, Livingstone lifts the tawdry details of the place into ironically mythic perspectives: the door is like that of a "dead-man's-chest"; pieces of furniture "confront each other in sword and trident stances"; the "outcopulated springs" of the bed amount to a "Golgotha for males". Yellowed pages from old issues of the famous magazine *Drum*, a prime vehicle in its day for up-and-coming black middle-class urban readers, recall a heyday of South African writers:

...sheets of Nat Nakasa and Bloke Modisane;
 of Casey Motsisi and Arthur Maimane;
 pages of Lewis Nkosi; while a piece signed
 Ezekiel Mphahlele sticks.

But the pages have been ignorantly relegated to line "shallow warped flimsy ill-fitting drawers" – those adjectives a concise comment on the entire, weirdly conglomerate culture of the modern South Africa. Countering this sardonic comment on the demeaning of creative writing, however, is the sense that these writers have nevertheless survived, a global company amongst whom Livingstone is happy to place himself. This littoral/literal meeting and melding of previously, ostensibly divided cultures is as much an integral part of the ecotone as natural intersections. Most importantly, then, the poem's final stanza insists on the tenacity of love, significantly couched once again in both marine and cosmic metaphors:

Yet love vaults unbidden from memory's dungeon,
 its lyricism whirled from the seabed of this world
 to bounce off heedless constellations [...]

Characteristically, such valorisation of love as Livingstone finds is haunted, if not wholly compromised, by an apocalyptic sense of humanity's impending, deserved demise. In a key poem, the fantasial "The Wall beyond Station X" (280), the poet walks out along a narrow wall angling away "across the shallows". But as the poem wryly puts it, "The history of walls is not too good." This one narrows, becomes ever more precarious, the weather stormy, return impossible. It ends: "Equilibrium/ at risk, you try a quick glance back:/ the wall behind you

is dissolving as you pass”. This is precisely the quality of the ecotone. Nowhere is the tension between love and misanthropy more evident to Livingstone than at the symbolically shifting borderline of all intersections, the littoral zone where natural and cultural influences, both destructive and creative, both global and local, necessarily converge and dissolve, conflict and mutate.

In sum, the littoral zone is a region of “impossible compromises” and “insupportable interfusions”, as he puts it in the collection’s last poem, “Road Back” (312). In one guise, the sea is his “old ally against psychic apathy, who saves [his] soul from atrophy”; but it (or, in Livingstone’s gendered characterisation, “she”) also teases him with “her obverse face: a negligence verging/ without cruelty on maternal indifference.” The insanity of the highway along which he finally drives home is a reflection of humans’ crazy inner world of unquenchable desires, “the whole substructure steered and toed/ by the doomed and hurtling microcosm within.” Humanity, Livingstone believes, is destined for self-destruction. Like everything else that lives, it tends “to excrete/ its entropy”. Once we overwhelm our resources, planetary systems will reassert themselves. “Gaia: in the end, you have to win” (313), and so perhaps the planet does not need him as one of its quixotic “knights”. Still he feels he has no choice but “to accept the gage and buckle to”, take his water-samples, write his “words, words, words”, throw the starfish back. Livingstone draws again on Lovelock’s Gaian conceptualisations to produce a sad closing paean to miraculous life on what is, effectively, the only bioregion, the whole Earth:

The planet counter-attacks.
Its choice is plain: kill or be killed.
Ours too: symbiosis or death
at the hands of a bright blue cell
– the only living thing in known space.



Chapter Seven

John Eppel and the flowers of nativity

To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, every document of remembrance is also a document of forgetting. Selected events and personalities tend to be memorialised to the exclusion of others. Continuations of power structures at the communal level, and continuations of identity at the individual level, are purchased in the coinage of memory – memorials, texts, images, sensations, stories passed on orally. Nowhere is this more problematic than in the wake of revolutionary change. In the post-colonial or post-independence situation, such as that experienced in Zimbabwe in 1980, efforts are made by the incoming powers to memorialise their own achievement in overturning colonial white minority rule, while suppressing memories of the latter. In Zimbabwe, Heroes' Acres were established in major centres, most notably Harare, to memorialise ZANU-PF's guerrilla stalwarts, while statues of settler-era luminaries were removed from public spaces. From a vantage-point overlooking my home town, Mutare, for example, a statue of one of the earliest settler poets and autobiographers, Kingsley Fairbridge, was removed to an obscure spot behind a museum building. This kind of response is common, and commonly emotive (witness the recent controversies attendant on removal of statues of Lenin in Ukraine, and of Lee in the American South). It was seen as an act of rather startling generosity when, in the wake of the #RhodesMustFall campaigns of 2016, then President Robert Mugabe directed that the burial-monument to Cecil John Rhodes in Zimbabwe's Matobo Hills should be left alone.

Paradoxically, the memories of the settler minority, from Fairbridge in the 1890s to Alexandra Fuller a century later, have received a level of publication and publicity disproportionate to their numbers. A slew of memoirs, led by Peter Godwin's *Mukiwa* (1996) and Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2002), have achieved international fame and multiple re-printings. They range from militaristic hagiographies still extolling the superiority of Rhodesian troops to memories of near-idyllic childhoods, thus catering for a range of settler nostalgias. In the "decolonising" atmosphere of the present, any such nostalgia tends to be

roundly denounced. At the same time, the controversial seizure of thousands of white-owned farms after 2000 has concentrated intensive academic attention on identity-creation amongst remaining white farmers, offering a highly specific and interesting focus for the burgeoning area of “whiteness studies”.³³

This intensity of interest nevertheless leaves some notable gaps: the poetic, as opposed to prose memoirs; the suburban; and the satirical. The work of John Eppel is located in all three of these areas. Eppel was born in Lydenburg, South Africa, in 1947, but moved with his parents to the small mining village of Colleen Bawn when he was four. He has had a long and distinguished career as an English teacher; he has remained to the present in suburban Bulawayo, and continues to teach informally, as well as to add to probably the most voluminous body of creative work of any writer in the country after Doris Lessing. His oeuvre of novellas, short stories and volumes of poetry, a number of them recipients of literary prizes, thus provides a unique depth of perspective on forty-odd years of Rhodesian-Zimbabwean history. Most of the work is locally set in or near Bulawayo’s suburbs or school environs, so familiar to Eppel; and most is acidically satirical in nature, a feature almost designed to marginalise him. (He parallels Roy Campbell in this respect.) Satire generally has not been a prominent or easily assimilable mode in Zimbabwe’s literary traditions. Eppel’s coruscating portrayal of white settler society has not always endeared him to his peers; and subsequently ZANU-PF’s cultural commissars have narrowly misconstrued as racist his satirical take on all Zimbabwe’s groups, from political leaders to suburban madams to NGOs.

His poetry, while generally less biting or lewdly satirical than the stories, has also incorporated two “traditional” elements which have not been kindly received by Zimbabwean commentators and the occasional post-colonial scholar. The first is the consistent if varied use of traditional English stanzaic forms, as well as the sonnet, sestina and villanelle. The second is a high degree of concentration on the poet’s relation to the natural world. Both of these have laid Eppel open to accusations of an anachronistic adherence to foreign, imported poetics, especially the English Romantics. While Eppel acknowledges his indebtedness to the Romantics, and insists on crafted form as a vital element in good poetry, to confine a reading of him to these elements alone is, I believe, to do the work a considerable disservice.

33 See for example, Pilossof; Rutherford; Wolmer; Hartnack; Hughes.

Eppel's poetic treatment of the natural world employs at least three obvious foci. One is more conventional landscape, including that of the Matopos or Matobo Hills, and more specifically the environs of Rhodes's grave. More pervasively, however, the environment is the suburb. Within that ambit, secondly, Eppel has written frequently about birds. The third focus – plants – I will concentrate on exclusively in this chapter. Plant-centred poems occur mostly in the earlier collections *Spoils of War* (1989) and *Sonata for Matabeleland* (1995), and rather fewer in the later collections, *Together* (with Julius Chingono, 2011), *Textures* (with Togara Muzanenhamo, 2014), and *O Suburbia* (2019). An attentive exploration of this grouping of poems takes us beyond the usual scope of colonial-landscape studies, which have mostly focused on how British painterly aesthetics of the “sublime” and “picturesque” predetermined responses to, and modification of, landscapes in the colony. However, as William Wolmer has shown, landscapes are polysemous, and in places “views of landscape were partially vernacularised” by colonial settlers in ways deliberately distinct from the European conventions: “the Western gaze was never all-encompassing and was often resisted” (Wolmer, 12). Wolmer goes on to explore indigenous views of landscape as modes of resistance. Eppel does something a little different. His plant-centred poems explore dimensions largely overlooked by the more common academic focus on the wide-angle landscape gaze and on the conception of *wilderness*. He as it were miniaturises the gaze on the natural, and locates most treatments in the suburban street and garden, where in fact most whites resided. While obviously closely tied ancestrally to a “Western gaze”, the poems are far from being an unselfconscious “settler” re-iteration of an artificial or fetishising Romantic nature-worship. Indeed, they echo closely recent post-colonial ecocriticism's concerns with nature as components of structures of socio-political (in)justice. Eppel's treatment of flowers is highly self-aware, even self-critical, and seldom if ever divisible from his other major themes: personal love and loss of love, the nature of settler belonging, and the entanglements of power-politics through decades of turbulence.

Above all, the poems probe the multidimensional nature of memory, in particular the relationships between post-coloniality and memory. Most studies in this area have focused on the repression of indigenous memory by imperial and colonial epistemologies. Eppel's work comes from a different angle: how does the post-colonial resident white explore memory? What are his relations between form and freedom, between satire and belonging, between seasonal

ephemerality and political uncertainty, and between literary allusion and sensual immediacy? To impose a slightly artificial scheme on this body of work, we might distinguish three obvious phases or aspects: memorialising childhood; enduring the war; and exploring the fragility of post-independence belonging. The very operation of memory, of course, transgresses and interleaves these broad distinctions.

Memorialising childhood

Childhood may be the area of memory most vulnerable to idealisation. That said, it was possible as a cushioned white (as I can attest) to have had a near-idyllic childhood in then Rhodesia, especially before (but even during) the war years. Eppel grew up in Colleen Bawn during the 1950s – halcyon days in the country’s white-ruled period, with the Second World War receding, the nationalist stirrings of the early- to mid-1960s still ahead. In several poems Eppel alludes to this period. However, never does he retrospectively linger on the perspective of the child, innocent because “deracialized, depoliticized and dehistoricized” (Harris, 106). His first collection was published in 1989, well after Independence, and even the poems most fondly reminiscent of childhood are necessarily modified by the later, post-war perspective.

In “Remember Granny Trot’s Mulberry Jam?” (*Spoils*, 10-11), for example, the poet recalls not so much the mulberry tree itself (common in our colonial gardens) but a product of it, a familial and comforting jam, along with “syringaberry battles/ and the stink of crushed marigolds”, and a garden replete with “capsicums, horseradish,/ pumpkin ... paw paws sweeter/ than sugar”. The distance between the remembering and the remembered is already implicit in the title and its uncertain interrogative, and the poem is constructed as a complex interleaving of these Edenic fragments with their own desuetude: the decline into old age of the poet’s mother and of Granny Trot herself;³⁴ the intervention of real, adult war; the loss of Joe, a dog, to a puffadder bite (an ironic reference to the Satanic serpent, perhaps). A withering of flowers closes the poem, symbolic of the passing of an entire era:

34 Granny Trot, it is clear from other poems, resided in South Africa, not Rhodesia. Some caution is necessary in conflating the two countries’ experiences, although, as Eppel’s regular use of Afrikaans names indicates, ties were intricate.

[...] our St Joseph's lilies stopped making flowers.
 It could have been the granite sand. It could
 have been a hot October wind. It could
 have been the rattle of choppers. It could
 have been a time for lilies to sicken
 in the gathering shriek of cicadas.

The drumbeat of the phrase "It could/ have been", despite its conditionality, strikes a fatalistic note, as does the flat tautology of the final idea: it was simply time.

The torturous background sound of cicadas – Christmas beetles – recurs in the immediately preceding poem, which reveals more explicitly a tension between the persistence of memory and a desire to move on. "Except in Poems I Won't Look Back" (*Spoils*, 8-9) recounts the poet's visit to his erstwhile childhood home, his wife or partner beside him. He summons up multiple intimate details of his remembered life, from railway sleepers to his father's trousers – above all his mother's flowers:

She loved petunias, and they flourished
 in that sunny place where the soil was full
 of bitter lime. She planted "Rosy Morn"
 and "Rose 'o Day". She had "multifloras",
 "grandifloras", and variegated types,
 like "Butterscotch" and "Cherry Pie".

Now, however, that imported yet beautiful prissiness is gone. The roof of his old home is down, the walls are scrawled with lewd graffiti and "Zanu slogans", and "pioneer bush" is taking over the remnants. (*Pioneer* has a particularly ironic ring, given the status of Rhodes's 1890 Pioneer Column in Rhodesian myth-making.) The poet walks away, vowing not to look back "except in poems" – even as the writing of the poem *is* a looking back, as are the involuntary nightmares with which the poem ends. Enacted here, as in many of the poems discussed below, is what Nick Meihuizen has termed "the hurt of incompletion, the incompletion of alienation" ("A troubled sense", 66). This is not – or not only – a nostalgia for a winsome childhood, but something more painful. The poet is, in the words of the

collection's opening poem, "Last Night in Colleen Bawn" (*Spoils*, 7), "haunted still by memories".

The passing of childhood is repeatedly cross-hatched with another sense of passing: that of the "Rhodesian" as the community frays after 1980. A recurrent motif, a contrast between imported and indigenous species, in some cases explicitly symbolises the alien status of white settlers. In another poem looking back to childhood, "A Flower Poem, No.2" (*Spoils*, 32-3), Eppel focuses on the marigold. The speaker-poet recalls most strongly the flower's smell (the olfactory is a sensual element in many poems):

You give off a pungent
khaki odour of crushed beetles, soil,
old men, hat linings, ointment and dung.
And yet I love your smell – your odour –
better than a million Krugerrands
carpeted around a city hall [...]

This last image is cleverly ambivalent, since the brilliant gold, coin-round marigold was and is frequently used to vividly carpet public garden areas – a gilding of the architectures of power. Simultaneously, Eppel invokes the flower's foreign origins in Mexico (it is a player in what Alfred Crosby famously called "ecological imperialism"³⁵), its centrality to his mother's garden, and its botanical cousinhood to the so-called "black jack", or "khaki weed" (*Bidens pilosa*). Though also originating in Central America, black jack has become so ubiquitous that it is essentially naturalised; like the poet, we locals all recall constantly picking the clingy narrow seeds out of our socks. Despite it being classed a weed, unwanted by definition and described by botanist Clive Bromilow as "unpleasant" and "extremely troublesome" (*Problem Plants*, 217), it is the black jack that this speaker "really" loves – precisely because, like Proust's madeleines, it evokes a sudden rush of childhood memories. Though it is not explicit here, the valorisation of the imported, marginalised weed can scarcely avoid being read as paralleling the

35 Crosby's study did not extend to suburbanisation and the garden as a vector for biotic invasions; but see Jeremy Foster, *Washed with Sun: Landscape and the making of white South Africa* (2008). For further discussion of relationships between the garden, poetry and belonging, see Wylie, "Garden of love's decay", and "Playing God in small spaces".

foreign-but-naturalised white Zimbabwean. As it is, this poem ends on images of the disintegration not only of more-or-less coherent childhood, but of the white “Rhodesian” community itself; the final section is related from a wistful diasporic perspective:

I believe
the moon still visits there. But Puza
the Simpson’s old spaniel is dead now,
and Fred is in Cape Town, and Gillie
is married, and Taz was killed by ‘terss’,
and Bob’s gone religious, and the old
cow down at the dam is Fray Bentos,
and I am overseas, looking out
for marigolds to finger and sniff.

Much of this is about normal passages and movements, of pets and of private lives, but as in the poems discussed earlier, the advent of the guerrilla war is pivotal, both as a subject of memory in itself and as a turning-point for the white community’s cohesion and self-definition.

Various alien plants serve as vectors for a specific aesthetic of colour and cultivation that mark the settler identity: marigolds, poinsettias, crocuses, roses and, archetypally, the jacaranda trees which annually cloak so many colonial-planted towns in a riot of violet colour. In the slight poem “Only jacarandas” (*Textures*, 7), the poet seems to revel uncomplicatedly in the aesthetic pleasure of those carpets of fallen mauve; but in “Jacaranda” (*Sonata*, 19), Eppel mercilessly mocks that settler aesthetic, from the madam’s patronising use of “chilapalapa” language to the “drum-thighed ... vast-bummed” Rhodesian male “curling the lips at all/ things bright and beautiful”. The poem is related from the frustrated point of view of the “Matabele” (Ndebele) gardener ordered to sweep the fallen flowers, replete with foraging bees, off “lo driveway checha [quickly]”:

Why must they grow
things you can’t eat or smoke or sell? What kind
of Boss – stab, stab – is this who worships trees
with flowers that make work, and sting like bees?

If Eppel courts several Rhodesian stereotypes here, he also hints at the violence that lurks beneath the surface of the colonial “civilising mission” – violence which had erupted in the 1890s (the First Chimurenga, in nationalist terms), and again in the 1970s (the Second).

Enduring war

Eppel has not written voluminously about the 1970s guerrilla war and his own conscription in it, but memories of it shadow much of what transpires later, “slip[p]ing like envelopes/under the doors of our mind” (“Rhodesian Lullaby”; *Spoils*, 15). One key work is “Spoils of War” (43-5). The poem is delivered in jaunty language with visually variable line lengths, an apparent informality belied by unobtrusive but consistent rhymes and a rigorously decasyllabic line. It relates how the speaker, entrenched in an infamously remote Rhodesian outpost at Vila Salazar, dares Frelimo troops across the Mozambican border in order to dig up a rare succulent, a Sabi Star or *Adenum obesum*. (Eppel regularly inserts scientific botanical names, usually lightly teasing his own teacherly portentousness.) It will do well, he hopes, back in Colleen Bawn. The middle of the three-page poem relates a night firefight and the killing of some “gooks”. The speaker’s fellow-soldiers plunder the corpses for a Tokarev pistol, “a portable radio, a fistful/ of rounds, an empty AK magazine,/ five teeth, a penis, a number of ears”, while he settles for the corpulent plant. He cannot explain to his fellows that he is “being purged/ of [his] Rhodesianism” – now an “ugly/ word with its jagged edge”. By comparison, he and the Sabi Star are like “lovers”, its transplantation (though technically illegal) a fruitful, flowering addendum to a terrible war. Still, the final section of the poem, in which he moves deliberately “to the past tense”, evinces that sense of distance and removal from both the childhood locus and the established sense of Rhodesian identity:

The going

was tough but at last I had my frilly-
petalled (highly protected) succulent
shrub buried up to its neck in granite
sub-soil. *Adenum* does not transplant
well, but this one flourished. You can see it
there today. It flowers in September.

And if ever you live in our old home –
 the one in the village – please remember
 not to over-water my cuddlesome
 stump. And if you are bothered by the law,
 tell them that the plant is a spoil of war.

A persistent note of lament, at times close to self-pity, tests whether Eppel really has purged himself of his “Rhodesianism” – not an easy sort of operation in any circumstances. The erosion of that white community’s sense of itself in the war’s aftermath is the subject of a number of poems utilising plants as vehicles. “Star of Bethlehem” (*Sonata*, 12) revisits the motif of picking a plant in wartime, “stuffed [...] in my combat/ jacket on top of a phosphorous bomb”. While the first stanza recalls some childhood musical experiences, and introduces the refrain “pretty damned close to epiphanies”, the second stanza both recalls and distances the mother, reiterating that thematic division between imported and indigenous plants:

My mother banned it from the flower beds;
 to her it ranked with stinkblaar as a chronic
 garden weed: the glossy leaves, the flat heads
 in white and purple, smelling of tonic,
 she did not hesitate to destroy. She
 called them “missionary plants”, the housewives’
 bane. Yet these flowers of nativity
 which, healers claim, are saving many lives:
 curing cancer and Hodgkin’s disease,
 are pretty damned close to epiphanies.

The poet seems unwilling or unable to release himself into unqualified epiphanies – a reticence revisited in other poems, too (eg. “Grass in winter”; *White Man*, 2). For all the literary history of Romanticism on which Eppel regularly draws, he in this way distances himself from it. In some respects, Eppel echoes Thoreau, not so much in the orotund provincialism of *Walden* as in the close, even technician, observations of Thoreau’s less well-known *Wild Fruits* (2000). Eppel never approaches Thoreau’s exuberant spiritualising reverence. This reticence seems linked also to an inability to fully relinquish the past. The paradoxical

endeavour: to remember and to relinquish simultaneously.

Though the elections that brought Mugabe to power in March 1980 rendered the war retrospectively futile in white eyes, and political power was overturned, life moves on in other, mostly domestic modes. Importantly, Eppel has children, and a number of poems look to their future, and to them *as* the future. It is natural, so to speak, to compare growing children to emerging flowers, with all their fragility, beauty and hopeful vivacity. In “My Blooming P(l)antisocracy” (*Sonata*, 29), Eppel alludes punningly to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey’s dream of setting up an ideal society in North America, which they called a Pantisocracy, though the poem’s garden idyll bears only a superficial resemblance to that unfulfilled scheme of grandiose egalitarianism. In the poem’s first stanza, Eppel combines memories of his mother’s garden and of the army – two forms of regimentation. “We” – his parental family – “grew the neatest May bush in the world.” The shrub’s confinement within “herbaceous borders” is paralleled with “lay-byes during the struggle”, “patriotic slogans”, and the vicious, inane drill commands of an “RSM” – all forms of “tunnel-vision” that the poet dismisses: “That was yesterday.” In the second stanza, both the May bush (*Spirea cantoniensis*) and the poet’s children burst forth in liberated life: “spray after spray” of “scruffy blossom” is matched by the children’s exuberant, unruly leaping through sprays of water from a “riddled hosepipe”. Yet even here, Eppel seems unable to enjoy the anarchic moment without alluding to some undertow of threat. The poem closes:

our son and daughter,
bolting into the blue beyond and then
bolting back; scruffy white flowers of glee
and gloom, our blooming p(l)antisocracy.

The very euphony of “glee ... gloom ... bloom” casts ironic and troubling shadows on the bucolic idealism. Not without good reason: despite liberation, violence continued to plague Zimbabwe, notably the attacks on Joshua Nkomo’s ZAPU party in Bulawayo’s Entumbeni townships in 1981, followed by the so-called *Gukurahundi* massacres throughout Matabeleland, news of which leaked despite media blackouts. Also inevitably concerning to a white parent was how the children would find or forge a secure sense of community, with the socially comfortable “Rhodesian” sector dispersing, coming under moral fire, and being

obliged to reconsider social relationships with the black majority on every level.

This reconsideration is at several points refracted through the poet's identification with an indigenous plant – a way of imaginatively rooting oneself afresh in the country. This move is most centrally featured in “Song of the Makiwa Tree” (*Spoils*, 46), one of several poems explicitly connected with Rhodes's grave. The first two sections of the poem take in the great views west of the grave, evoking its palimpsest of indigenous and invasive histories. In sobering rhyming couplets the poet expresses his wish that his own ashes be scattered here. In the third section the poet identifies himself bodily with the *makiwa* (“white man”) tree which, like him, sheds pale skin:

Call me *Commiphora*, the Paperbark;
my trunk is green but my ashes are dark
[...]
Smell me smouldering in this chilly night,
watch the gradual dying of my light.
Scatter my ashes where makaza³⁶ spills –
among the slopes of five Matopos hills.

A kind of “Under Ben Bulbin” for a Zimbabwean, ambivalent to the extent that identification is imagined as occurring fully only in death.

In another set of poems the decline of the Rhodesian is depicted through the withering of vegetation, often – in quasi-traditional Romantic mode – in conjunction with the turning of seasons. English seasons are roughly reversed in this southern hemisphere milieu, and Eppel must take account of the dry winters, the scorching heat of October, the iconic waiting for the summer rains – a conscious “vernacularisation” of the common motifs of English poetry. “October” (*Spoils*, 22), “Matabele Dry” (23), and “Our Last Hot Spell” (*Sonata*, 15) evoke the hottest months in which “baobabs shrivel and squat” and “a strychnos shrugs/ off dying leaves”. These poems are not overtly symbolic, but “Dispersal” (11) certainly is. It's a rather odd poem about opening the Bible at random, in a kind of “stichomachy”. The pages smell like an “imagined aroma of seedpods – / *Albizia amara*, I think” – wood turned into paper for the display of words. Through the pages the speaker senses or recalls “old trees dying back/

36 *Makaza* is misty rain, also locally known as *guti*.

a bit every year”, trees that “began dying/ long after we were born, and will be/ dying long after we are dead”. Though he reads on his chance Bible page, “He shall/ return no more to his house”, reflecting that persistent sense of displacement, the speaker also smells “seedpods maturing” – a more positive sense of dispersal and opening into new life. Characteristically, Eppel seems “not quite” sure about this “random” future vision:

No, it's not quite love,
and it's not quite long odds. It's the smell
of words not quite turning into trees.

As in some other poems, Eppel here reveals an uncertainty about the efficacy of poetry itself – a perennial epistemological problem complicated further by the post-colonial setting.

Post-colonial belonging

In Eppel's later poetry, new sub-themes also emerge: marriage, parenthood, and divorce, loneliness and ageing, and an increasingly testy critique of the civic failings and human-rights abuses of the Mugabe regime. Even a genuine commitment to staying on in constructive engagement did not make belonging easier for the “settler”; it became even more fraught in some ways. This was especially so after 2000, when the land redistribution process got under way and ZANU-PF propaganda revived an antagonistic racial discourse.

One early poem in which Eppel both probes his sense of societal division, and satirises his own acknowledged obsession with flowers, is “I and the Black Poet” (*Spoils*, 23). This is one of a clutch of poems set in South Africa, where of course white minority rule persisted until 1994. The poem opens with arch self-consciousness:

I have my subject in focus,
now I must focus my poem:
it's a memory of crocus
bulbs.

But the memory is “dim”: the poet has to look the flower up in a guide-book, and

he cannot decide how to describe it. In the end, he recognises that the seasons are wrong for crocuses:

Like silver-striped
leaves my arms follow seasons
never cold enough for a typed
memory of crocuses.

Poet as plant. The local irrelevance of this entangled effort is abruptly contrasted with the self-evident importance of the black poet's subject: the violence of "Sharpeville and Soweto". A similar contrast, also worked out through an olfactory flower image, governs "The Midnight Blooming" (*Spoils*, 27), in which the overheard revolutionary strains of the South African freedom chants "Amandla" and "Awethu" are redolent with a "thousand/ thousand perfumes", whereas the poet's stanzas are teasingly reduced to the bathetic, "pale/ as plastic bucket blue".

Conflating South African and Zimbabwean examples, American anthropologist David McDermott Hughes, in his provocative study *Whiteness in Zimbabwe*, derided "I and the Black Poet" as a "fetish[isation]" of flowers. That is, the usage is a pathological symptom of what he perceived as a propensity amongst white Rhodesian-Zimbabweans to forge appreciative relationships with an aestheticised Nature rather than with the country's indigenous people. Moreover, he argued, it was a self-deceiving means of actually *avoiding* such cross-racial relations (10).³⁷ Whatever the merits of Hughes's general argument, he signally failed to read the self-ironising voice, or to contextualise the poem within Eppel's broader satirical project. As Eppel has said: "I've always been a bit obsessed with flowers [...] and not just because they are pretty things with erotic connotations. I also use flowers to make fun of myself as a colonial, because the idea of planting pretty flowers instead of using the land to feed yourself is a very colonial thing" (*Textures*, iv). Still, to a degree Eppel himself evidences Hughes's view, as in an unabashed short poem, "Seeking Identity": "

I look for my self
in family, friends,

37 I have explored Hughes's arguments more fully elsewhere (Wylie, "Not quite a refutation").

home and garden,
grass, flowers, rocks, trees...

all the while resisting
my gender,
my skin colour,
my nationality.

(*O Suburbia*, 30)

Elsewhere, Hughes has acknowledged that some whites' re-characterisation of themselves as a kind of "lost tribe", "[u]ncomfortable and unsafe as it is", evinces "a certain honesty and humility" ("Whites lost and found", 173).

In direct response to Hughes' accusation, Eppel wrote "Yet Another Flower Poem" (*Together*, 143), in which he is both defensive and self-mocking.³⁸ He begins with a somewhat prosy discussion of the American Dream – doubtless an allusion to Hughes's outsider status. But the Dream is delusory, Eppel claims, just as the "flowers" of the poinsettia are actually "scarlet bracts or modified leaves", and he connects that colour to the superficial glitz of Hollywood. "But what," the poet asks, has the American Dream and its "manifest destiny" to do with his own Bulawayo suburban garden? He turns on his heel, replying, "Everything". The white imperialism underpinning the American Dream is, he implies, no different than that underpinning the colonisation of Rhodesia; only the self-justifying clichés are different ("rod of empire", "Rule Britannia"). That colonisation also brought the flower he gazes on, poinsettia, "*Euphorbia pulcherrima*", which is "as much a settler as I am". He vows not to leave before the shrub does: he is, idealistically, as rooted as it is. The poem ends with the speaker caught between the uncertainty of belonging and a visceral apprehension of immediate beauty:

My settler friends and me, our destiny
is obscure. We measure out our lives in platitudes, clichés,
watching the sun set on Zimbabwe, as it set on empire:
scarlet and gold, heart-breaking, most beautiful – *pulcherrima*.

38 According to Drew Shaw (in Eppel, *Textures*, iv), the sonnet sequence "The Hillside Dams in Bulawayo" (8-12) is also an extended riposte to Hughes.

There are, arguably, troubling equivocations here: is it imperialism itself that is seen as colourfully beautiful, as well as Zimbabwe, both being, historically, as ephemeral as a sunset? Are not the aesthetics of flowers and sunsets themselves culturally specific, one facet of an imperial mental machinery of conquest, which had palpable effects on the geo-practical level – the very layout of the suburban garden itself, for one? Gardens are both enclosed and porous, both havens from social dis-ease and sites of resistance to it, both spaces of individual creativity and palimpsests of historical belonging and disturbance. In short, gardens are contradictory and continuously renegotiated heterotopias.

The enclosed suburban garden provides a venue for inward-turning ruminations on privacy and imagination, echoing certain preoccupations of the Romantics. In a fine sonnet, “Poinsettias on Africa Day” (*Spoils*, 35), the political significance of the public holiday³⁹ is (after the title) entirely bypassed in favour of another, more private mode of belonging in Africa, one attentive to beauty, complex symbolic and literary histories, medicinal properties, sexuality, and emotional response:

Woke to bracts recalling
Apollo’s lust for Daphne. Lips open,
lips close, and the half-turned palmates falling.
Pulcherrima. Daphne Laureola.
Provoker of homeless poets. Consoler.

That Eppel is fully aware of the problematic here is evident in several other plant-centred poems. In the Petrarchan sonnet, “Hillside Road in Autumn” (*White Man Crawling*, 1), the octave evokes the indigenous vegetation, its active ecosystem now absent from the city’s modern riotousness:

This avenue should have been lined with trees
large enough to nest hamerkops, shelter
vervets, resolve the discord of a breeze,
shade road-rage, allay the helter-skelter
[...]
trees that could claim the public’s gratitude.

39 Africa Day, 25 May, was declared in 1963 to mark the founding of the Organisation of African Unity, and was adopted by Zimbabwe after 1980.

Instead, the sestet contrastively argues, the suburban road boasts a less satisfactory imposition, “dotted with colonials/ too scrawny for children to climb,/ or snakes to whisper in”. Nevertheless at times the avenue offers aesthetic pleasure:

Yet when that blossom spills
its incense on the smouldering grass, takes
to heart a variegated pink, a white
slipper, there comes a moment of delight.

That this “spot of time” has Wordsworthian antecedents does not justify throwing it out with the decolonising bathwater. Moreover, Eppel understands that his poetic aesthetic – his predilection for sonnets and such forms – is indissolubly tied to these other aesthetic tendencies. This is notable in another later poem, “Appropriating the Land” (*Textures*, 65), with its clear reference to the terminology of Mugabe’s post-2000 land acquisition process. The first of the poem’s three tightly-organised stanzas refers to the colonial processes of appropriating land, installing dams, roads, landfills, and “grid after grid” of urban planning – and also plants imported specifically for nostalgic aesthetic reasons: “We introduced fiddle-/ wood for its autumn-stressed/ hues and the way its falling petals/ sounded like rain”. In the third stanza Eppel focuses on the arguably equally artificial aesthetic of his poetry itself: “I stick to the rules deliberately,” he has said, “and part of this, of course, is a way of self-mockery” (*Textures*, iii).

We wrote poems about sunsets,
jacarandas, blue skies,
the dispositions of our pets,
and the fish eagle’s cries.
We wrote about bitter longing,
sometimes florid, sometimes terse –
metaphors and symbols thronging,
verse after verse after verse.

The verse, too, is a kind of “grid” upon reality, part of a recognisable cultural nexus, one which the speaker acknowledges as distinguishing his community (“We”) even as the critical awareness places him partly outside it. Do those aesthetics then govern, in certain ways, Eppel’s most recent griping about the

deterioration in Zimbabweans' daily life over the last twenty years? Certainly, some such critiques are couched in botanical terms – a new dimension to this imagistic strand in Eppel's work.

"Practising Scales" (*Sonata*, 60-1) roughly conforms to this chapter's three-part structure. The poem is delivered in ironically jaunty ballad form, and recounts the gradual transformation of Rhodesian institutions of school and sport, with their colonial names (Colenbrander Oval, St Mary's, Victoria Olympic Pool), partly through vegetal signifiers. The first part recalls Rhodesia and youth together; the focus is on "spunk" and girls, and "St Mary's English roses/ are mulched by 'garden boys'". In the next part, set post-Independence, the roses teem with "izintethe" (katydids or grasshoppers) – one might recall Brettell's roses being consumed by the indigenous duiker. In the third part, the decorative flowers give way altogether to "barren ground"; mealies grown on the former rugby fields die; "the cricket nets grow prickly pears/ the golf course harvests thorn".

That the swimming-pool in this poem becomes "a giant garbage mound" echoes another poem of suburban complaint, "Soap Rhymes with Hope" (*Together*, 101). This poem centres on the olfactory, has a somewhat analogous three-part structure, and is cross-hatched with nostalgic memories:

bauhinia
comes to mind, synchronising its perfume with the rotation
of my bicycle wheels, on my way to teach willing children
that nothing in nature dies.

The second part recalls a visit to Kew, the archetypal collection of imperial species, where "in late spring, the scent of lilacs/ made me weep for home" (ironically, given that lilacs are again alien to Zimbabwe). The poet longs also for a highly sexualised youth or manly prime, "syringa blossom" evoking "a drift of skirts eddying, pony tails swishing".

But winter's best fragrance was the sage leaf buddleia
that prospered in our neighbour's garden; and summer's was
plumeria,
its common name suggested by a famous scent invented
centuries ago by perfumer, Muzio Frangipane.

So quickly do they change from fluid green
to yellowish, to desiccated brown [...] In terminal
cymes some flowers remain, as white as wax,
mingling the bitter sweets of paradise
with odours of anxiety.

The poem ends on a dispirited note:

These falling leaves remind me
that the day has come and gone for ballots
to be counted, results announced, and I'm
afraid that change will never come.

As Eppel enters his seventies, it is appropriate to end on a poem less about politics than the personal phenomenon of ageing, "Let's Drink to Growing Old" (*O Suburbia*, 64). Identification with a tree is central (it echoes the makiwa tree discussed earlier, as well as "Spoils of War"), and it is primarily a sharply sensual and gently ironic lament at ageing, though broader politics lurks:

I lean against the monkey thorn
planted years ago,
before our youngest child was born,
before the wilting of the corn,
I watched the sapling grow.

I took the seed from Hillside Dams,
soaked it overnight,
before the slaughter of the lambs,
before those drunken dithyrambs,
its bark turned flaky white.

Its hooks are hard and shiny black,
its catkins yellow-gold;
its roughness presses at my back,
each ridge I feel, each scab, each crack,
so, cheers to growing old!

Trees of amnesia

Alexandra Fuller, in her appositely titled family memoir *Cocktail Hour under the Tree of Forgetfulness* (2011), notes that most Rhodesians, especially in the Smith era, routinely “denied the country an African history prior to the arrival of Europeans” (158). Invalidating any prior occupancy of land was a cornerstone of Rhodesian Front propaganda – what critics called the Mushroom Club: “Kept in the dark and fed horseshit” (159). As Andrew Hartnack and others have observed, on interviewing multiple white farmers, this wilful amnesia has widely persisted into the post-independence period. Eppel transgresses this narrowness in important respects. In his plant-centred, as well as numerous other poems and stories, he demonstrates a high degree of self-consciousness about the political and epistemological traps, employs an impressive range of reference, technique and theme, and demonstrates strong imaginative empathies with groups and individuals other than his “own”. Crucially, he “fails” to arrive at a destination in his search for a post-colonial sense of belonging. He exemplifies, I think, Ashleigh Harris’ observation that “the claiming of white Zimbabwean identity is a complex process in which the tensions between belonging and ownership, between displacement and settling, and between personal and national memories and histories are *negotiated*” (Harris, 117; my emphasis). Part of that negotiation is forging a response both to people and to natural elements in the world. That world and its history is inescapable, but one endeavours not to replicate the oppressive strategies of the imperial and colonial projects. Though often cloaked in raunchy satire which courts stereotyping – satire itself depends on it – Eppel’s work demonstrates, in my view, a deeply humane working with, and reworking of, memory. In its complexity, Eppel’s poetry can also be said to embody Felix Guattari’s *Three Ecologies*: “a nascent subjectivity” is inseparable from “a constantly mutating socius [and] an environment in the process of being reinvented”. That nexus is neither seamless nor immutable, having been produced by “*heterogenesis*, in other words, a process of continuous resingularization” (Guattari, 45). In his interleaving of themes and levels, of the personal and public, of the literary and the scatological, the environmental and the human, of the punchy and the provisional, Eppel exemplifies, in a unique manner, that continuous process.



Afterthought

The poets dealt with in this collection of essays are some of the major poets of our time – but only some. A more wide-ranging ecocritical analysis would reveal a great deal more, including poets who might not at first be considered ‘environmentalist’ in any fashionably recognisable form. Current poetry offers a wealth of relevant material, as people generally become more attuned to the scale and complexity of the ecological climacteric. (I prefer the term to the usual “crisis”. A crisis is something you suffer temporarily before returning to normal; after a climacteric, nothing can be the same again.) Even a superficially innocuous or merely personal poem about an owl or a chameleon takes on unexpected significance in the context of species and habitat depletion; the suburban garden can no longer be regarded as an ecologically neutral or unimportant space; the many old and recent poems about fires around Cape Town can no longer be considered outside the manifold of global overheating. And so on. We are all inside this thin meniscus of atmosphere, soil and interdependent multispecies life, all the rich and all the poor; those who think about it, those who don’t, and those who actively deny that anything important is happening. Any means of communication that can enhance our knowledge and re-distribute our compassion feels astronomically important today. Nothing – *nothing* – is more important now than reassessing, and ultimately rebalancing, our relationship with the natural foundation of our own existence. Poetry – and the critical appreciation of poetry – is one path towards doing that.

Makhanda, January 2023

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Acknowledgements

Parts or versions of the following chapters appeared in previous publications, and are reprinted with permission of the editors or publishers concerned.

Chapter One: in Wendy Woodward and Susan McHugh, eds. 2017. *Indigenous Creatures, Native Knowledges, and the Arts*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 35-58.

Chapter Four: in Pat Louw and Travis V Mason, eds. 2009. *Birds: In and out of literature*. *Alternation*. Special issue. 16/2. 126-150.

Chapter Six: in Cheryll Glotfelty and Karla Armbruster, eds. *The Bioregional Imagination*. Atlanta: University of Georgia Press. 312-328.

Chapter Seven: in Wendy Woodward and Erika Lemmer, eds. 2019. *Journal of Literary Studies*. 35/4. 58-76.

I remain grateful for correspondence with and/or permissions granted for earlier iterations from the Livingstone estate, the Brettell family, Marge Clouts, Alan James, and John Eppel. The Department of Literary Studies in English at Rhodes University afforded me ideal working conditions throughout the years these essays were written. The staff at the National English Literary Museum (NELM), now Amazwi, have been wonderfully supportive and helpful in many ways beyond mere archiving. As always, Bronwyn Tweedie has unstintingly lent her expertise in the design and publication process. Thanks to the philanthropic Doug Bullis and Atelier Books for fielding my nonsense, and about 471 other people for encouragement, challenges, editing, suggestions, reviewing, coffee and all the other things that constitute the weirdness that is the academic machine.



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