



Axon: Creative Explorations, Vol 11, No 1, July 2021

LYRICAL STRATEGIES AND POETICS OF PLACE

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This paper explores a range of poetic strategies used to express changing perceptions and experiences of place. It engages with 'poetry as speculation', as a theme that provokes reflection on ways in which poetic language enacts thought and feeling — such as surmise and surprise — in a manner not limited to presenting content that might already be considered 'speculative'. Poems by Rosemary Dobson and Meg Mooney and a prose poem by Stephanie Green are discussed, to explore evocations of place and expressions of mood as diverse as wondering, questioning, and affirming the strange conditionality of things. The paper draws on a range of ideas from studies in poetics about poetic composition, to help analyse the ways in which these poems create dramatic tensions and refresh ways of seeing, speaking and understanding.

Keywords: poetry; prose poetry; lyric; poetics and ethics; place

Introduction

This article explores a range of poetic strategies used to express experiences and perceptions of place. It engages with 'poetry as speculation', as a theme that provokes reflection on ways in which poetic language enacts thought and feeling — such as surmise and surprise — in a manner not limited to presenting content that might already be considered 'speculative'. This theme implies something other than 'speculative poetry', or writing 'about' unresolved problems or possible states of being. In contrast, the current usage, 'speculative fiction', identifies works by attention to their themes, at least in the first instance, even if the narrative strategies used to represent them vary within and across subgenres or hybrids in this category. My aim is not to suggest that poetry is always speculation. Rather, it is to explore expressions of mood as diverse as wondering, questioning, conjecturing, and manifesting the strange conditionality of things, in evocations of place, as affordances of poetic form.

In exploring varied expressive strategies, I draw on a range of ideas about poetic means of composition. One source is the work of Riffaterre (1978), which combines principles from several fields of poetics. Of interest here are the ideas of the hypogram (1-22) — in which a poem digresses around a key word that is unspoken or alluded to — and the matrix (115-166) — a play of variations on an implicit representational framework, an idea that Riffaterre pursues particularly in relation to

prose poetry.[1] I also engage with work on poetic affect and ethos in more recent critical writings. These concerns are exemplified by Brophy (2011), who suggests that poetic ‘witnessing’ requires ‘a willingness to take up a state of mind somewhere between intimacy and yearning — a state conducive to producing “strange poetry”’. Witness involves a sense of ‘intimate contact with the imperfect physical world combined with the hunger of yearning ... that presence imposes upon us’. For Brophy, the ethos of strange poetry lies not in express moral judgments but in ‘a willingness to stay with disorienting contradictions’, in the dramatic tension of a poem, which resonates with ‘possibilities opened to our own thinking’ (Brophy 2011: n.p.).[2] In exploring the poetics of place, the following section considers the imaginative and ethical impulses evidenced in the shaping of personal vision and feeling in lyric form.

Place

Among the many ways in which contemporary poetry reflects on physical, subjective, cultural and spiritual dimensions of place, I focus on three main examples. The poem by Rosemary Dobson, ‘The Book’ (2012), explores subjective dimensions of place, memory and language. Meg Mooney’s ‘Birdwatching during the Intervention’ (2009) creates a cultural perspective on place in tension with another, implied perspective. And Stephanie Green’s ‘Screen/Mirror’ (2020) conjectures on disruption to a sense of personal identity and interpersonal communications and relations.

‘The Book’ begins *in medias res*, suggesting a subjective point of view within a room that is to become recognisable as situated in a place of care, with its visiting routines and blurring of the sociable and the private.

She plucks the bed-sheets with uneasy hands
Looking towards the door where people come.
Time runs its snatches of old film for her:
Those unshod country children whom she taught,
The house at midnight, fear — all dreams awry.
Her tears rise, sprinkle, and like rain are gone.
The women talk and tie their belted gowns.
Something that’s square is left upon the bed.

She takes it in her hands
Turns it about with pleasure and a cry
As though to say ‘I know this is a thing
I know, but cannot name.’
She lets the page fall open where it may
And smooths her fist over the black on white
Knowing that while she holds this in her hands
She yet might be a person, in a place.

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The initial description, minimally figurative, suggests the unnamed woman's nervousness, then gives way to the imagining of an interior space, where images succeed one another elliptically, as in montage, without precise temporal or causal links. The grammatical subject changes from 'she' to 'time', which runs scenes 'of old film' (children the woman taught, a fraught impression of a house). Then it becomes 'tears' that fall 'like rain'. This image is conventional, except that it alludes to representational scenarios rather than the 'real', so the pathos is restrained, as the reason for tears is indistinct (sad film/memory? the distress at being unable to speak?).

The reference contained in the title is alluded to in the transition to the second stanza: 'Something that's square is left upon the bed'. The meaning of something familiar that the character does not recognise by name becomes elusive, even as her curiosity about it becomes stronger. The strategy is reminiscent of what Riffaterre (1978: 4) refers to as a process of indirection in which phrases circle around an absent key word (a hypogram), creating a special structure of feeling that a literal reference would not convey. Here, the circumlocution has a dramatic purpose in suggesting the character's loss of both language and selfhood. A sense of excitement comes into the verse when it breaks from regular iambic pentameter, with the 'cry' a sign of spontaneity, as the woman feels the possibility of recognising something personally valuable, in the present. But the periphrasis continues, even as the pronoun 'she' gives way to the 'I' of the character, for imaginary dialogue: 'I know this is a thing / I know, but cannot name'. The problem of naming (reference) is not abstract but relates to an obscure sense of cognitive loss. The dialogue suggests something more than being momentarily unable to bring a name to mind, a deeper sense of not knowing something of the world and of the self. At the same time, the negation is also an affirmation of knowing *something*, as if (to risk a conjectural paraphrase), 'I can't name this thing, but I do know that'. These elusive modulations create the sense of a complex cognitive and emotional experience, sustaining dramatic tension of a kind that in another context McCooey identifies as 'a liminal space' that generates 'something new in the interplay between knowing and not-knowing' (2014: n.p.).^[3]

The dawning awareness that naming something is possible develops in a tentative reawakening of habit. As if in closer framing of the character, the verbs through the second stanza mark a series of little gestures (such as 'turns it', 'lets the page fall open'). These are actions of physical and mental memory partly returning. Breaking down and building up an activity, they are of the exploratory kind that one might have once learned to coordinate in learning to read, before it became second nature.^[4] They culminate in still incomplete recognition and self-recognition: 'Knowing that while she holds this in her hands / She yet might be a person, in a place'. The noun that would be determined by 'this' is missing. But in the image of holding something, perhaps protecting it, not-knowing and knowing (to recall McCooey's terms) are held in tension. That which is partially remembered holds the potential for something as familiar as finding your 'place' in a book, or the reassurance of being in the company of a book. In this 'this', since the book has been 'left' by others, is an intuition of human connection, balancing the dimly understood presences in the first stanza. In the phrase, 'She yet might be', the modal verb suggests uncertainty, but the iambic stress on the adverb sustains the possibility of the character's coming home to herself.

If there is a risk of speaking for others in portraying them, an ethos of restraint is present, a quality in Dobson's writing that McCooey refers to as 'humane austerity' (2012: xx). The details of painstaking

activity here create, to recall Brophy's idea of witnessing, a sense of yearning towards the character. The strangeness of a familiar activity being broken down and (incompletely) built up invites reflexivity: one may share in surprise of what it would be like to lose one's 'effects' of literacy. But, in the speculation, a sense of distance is preserved: it is only 'as though' the poet knows what the character experiences inwardly. The poem affords a reckoning with that distance between the poet or her reader who can name the book, and the character whose suffering and joy are movingly acknowledged.

A different engagement with place occurs in Meg Mooney's 'Birdwatching during the Intervention', which refers to the broad context of a political event and offers an ironic cultural perspective on it. Anthologised in *The Best Australian Poems 2009*, this poem appeared in *Fishtails in the Dust: Writing from the Centre* (Hutchinson 2009). The reference in its title to the Intervention sets up a play on expectations. Why birdwatching — indeed, why poetry — during the Intervention, a highly politicised event?[5] Of interest in relation to this question is the issue — explored by Musgrave (2014) in a discussion of semiotics and formalist poetics — of whether and how to engage discourses, ideas or assumptions that surround literary practice, while staying within the 'game' of poetry rather than entering a different discursive system. 'Birdwatching during the Intervention' suggests one kind of response to this question. In discussing this poem, it is again helpful to explore strategies of indirection. For this purpose, I adapt the idea from Riffaterre (1978: 47–60) that poetic language may transform established representations, discursive frames or stereotypes, by deploying a different 'code' or framework and so develop a new perspective on a subject, with an element of surprise.

Beginning mid-action, the first-person narration withholds as well as gives information:

As soon as we stop we hear them
'didyougetdrunk? 'didyougetdrunk? 'didyougetdrunk?

The sounds emanating from the unnamed 'them' are ambiguous, possibly hinting at stereotyping, but with an ironic sense when they turn out, in their onomatopoeic quality, to be the chorusing of birds. Drifting away from the title's direct reference to the Intervention, the poem proceeds in a detour, in a continuous present-tense encounter with sights and sounds that brighten perception. To the question of why birdwatching, or why poetry, the answer is a surprise: the political topic of the Intervention is held in distant view so as to see place differently, through the code of birdwatching, an unlikely frame of reference built playfully in the poem.

This framing invokes Indigenous knowledge, relation to country and storytelling, language, and song. It indicates an alternative — in the red sand are 'whole new stories I can't read every morning' — to an implied mainstream news perspective. In the lines that follow, different voices sound:

it's little showers of orange-beaked finches that visit.
'Nyii-nyii, Nyii-nyii, Nyii-nyii'
they chatter urgently in Pitjanjatjara.

The images work the theme of birdwatching lightly, suggesting heritage, as in this evocation of

traditional language, and communicating the songs and vibrancy of country, in active verbs and delicate noun phrases. In this series of images, a car goes past, the odd one out, eliciting comparison with the past, when ‘whitefellas’ were scarcer: there is an ironic sense of something predictable (perhaps ‘the more it changes...’), but still no explicit commentary about the Intervention. The poem builds towards a final conjecture, when wedgebills disappear as the speaker comes closer to seeing them, as if they are saying:

you can’t just look
and expect to see
in this country.

These lines still relate to birdwatching but have wider connotations of bearing witness to country. They raise the question of how to look, and listen, in ways that do not predetermine seeing. The modal verb in the phrase ‘can’t just look’ suggests an interpretation that comes from respectful engagement with place. Wittily framing the Intervention through an alternative lens, the poem refrains from direct argument in relation to the rationale or effects of the Intervention, and offers instead a performance of looking and listening in a more widely politicised environment. In this indirection, it makes an ethical appeal to observe and listen, in a context where questions of voice play out across the wider public sphere.

I turn now to prose poetry. The relations of this form to poetry more generally have been discussed in depth (e.g. Burt 2016; Caldwell 2018; Hetherington and Atherton 2015), and here I only seek to add a reflection on the affordance of prose poetry for speculation. In this regard, I take up the idea from Riffaterre that prose poetry has a particular feature that constitutes its formal unity (1978). Riffaterre locates this feature in the way a prose poem ‘generates a particular formal constant’, which is coextensive with the text and inseparable from the significance’. He sees a form of doubleness at work. Two ‘sequences’, or ‘derivations’, of a semantic or thematic matrix create ‘interferences’ with one another that are contained in a dramatic tension within the unique structure (117).[6] Given that prose poetry differs from poetry in its spatial arrangement and absence of versification, Riffaterre considers that the doubleness of prose poetry is a ‘conspicuous’, though not a unique, formal feature.

Stephanie Green’s ‘Screen/Mirror’ appears in a collection of short-form writing compiled amid the COVID-19 pandemic and focused on the theme of ‘the incompleteness of human experience’ (Prendergast 2020: 7). It creates a convergence of two formerly distinct frames in a way that makes the prose poem itself a strange space of surmise on personal, interpersonal and technological disruptions experienced in the pandemic.

If this frame holds a mirror then I face a hundred masks, daily,
bearing witness to the old emotions — joy, rage, grief and
boredom. This one smiles kindly, offering consolation. This
one is polite impatience, eyes askance. That one is all stony
silence. Another never arrives, or is invisible, lurking
somewhere at the margins. In all this I cannot see myself, or,
you would say, it is only myself that I see. In fact, I gave away
self-study years ago, with the golden complexion of youth. But

these shades, seemingly reflections, still catch my eye, that half-shock of familiarity. The others I know so well, colleagues, family, friends: ghosts in a machine I barely recognise. How much is a performance? We are together and apart, reaching out to touch the surface between us, impermeable yet changing, unsure how we seem to each other. It's not that appearance has ceased to matter. Even now I smooth an eyebrow or run fingers through unbrushed hair, wondering if I should wear lipstick, next time.

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The title starts an interplay of the two frames — with traditional associations of the computer 'screen' for communication with others, and the 'mirror' for reflection and self-reflection — in a figurative juxtaposition. This relation is similar to metaphor, where a word or phrase shifts from its 'standard place' to an 'improper' one, a place where it does not usually belong (Donoghue 2016: 99), insofar as the terms 'screen' and 'mirror' enter into a complex exchange with one another. The forward slash, no gaps, familiar from website communications, suggests both identity and difference. Knowing is conditional: 'If this frame holds a mirror then I face a hundred masks', then, in the screen-frame of others, I face a confusion of masks that is also mine. Here, 'bearing witness to the old emotions' is a contradictory process, unbalancing the usual logic: I can't see myself in the screen for others, yet it is 'only myself that I see' as the screen becomes a mirror-screen.

The ambiguity increases with an apparent shift towards relief and clarification through the verisimilitude of reference, in past-tense recording: 'In fact, I gave away self-study years ago'. But here, too, is an impression of 'looking' into the past, as in a mirror, at another image of self that, if not another mask, has the form of stylised poetic mimesis ('with the golden complexion of youth'). The unsureness of knowing self and others continues, as changed 'shades' on screen are also instants of reflection, in both senses of the word.

In its syntagmatic development, this prose poem (arguably, like many others) does not develop temporal and causal relations in a typical narrative resolution. The variants, even the past-tense 'fact', interrelate in a synchronised present, in the deixis and ambivalence of direct speech. Now the question arises: 'How much is a performance?' It synchronises with the opening line, 'If this [screen] frame holds a mirror'. Is 'this' frame also the poem, holding a mirror to our screen appearances? Is such a question another derivation of a trope — to hold 'the mirror up to nature' (affirming identity, or scorning that which is masked) as in *Hamlet* (3.2.21-2), now distorted in the exchange of screen and mirror? The uncertainty of who is speaking, of who 'we are' in the new scenario, is performed, as the poem itself plays soliloquy.

The clausula sustains the uncertainties with a 'wonder' — whether 'to wear lipstick', next time — as if perhaps putting on my face (as in the sociolect) might be either part of identity or another mask. But like the recalled past, the unsure future is contained in the matrix, the constant generated by the variants of interference between screen and mirror. Coextensive with the text, the variants play as derivations from the title, in a structure that elegantly 'holds' uncertainty.

Reflections

I have drawn on varied critical approaches in poetics to explore strategies by which some contemporary lyrical poetry evokes and speculates on complexities and contradictions of place. The poems discussed here play on habitual ways of speaking and seeing, creating tensions that make the familiar strange and offer new light on things. So, for instance, in 'The Book', the suspense of working indirectly around a key word that is absent enables a poignant imagining of loss and uncertain knowledge of self and place. A similar formal strategy works differently in 'Birdwatching during the Intervention', to imply the ethical value of learning how to listen, and to look again, for greater understanding, in an unresolved political and social context. Also noted in that poem is a strategy of changing the frame through which place is seen, in this case with a clarity of vision. The comparable tactic of bringing representational frames into a new tension in 'Screen/Mirror', on the other hand, becomes a means of confronting uncertainties about personal identity and social relations in physical and virtual space, animated and intensified in the context of the pandemic. In such varied uses of poetic strategies, generating affective and ethical insight, the poems manifest the power of lyric writing to respond to contingency, according to the best lights of place.

Acknowledgements

For permission to quote poems in full, I am grateful to University of Queensland Press and the estate of Rosemary Dobson ('The Book'), and to Stephanie Green ('Screen/Mirror'). I also wish to thank *Axon's* anonymous referees for helpful comments on this paper.

[1] In Riffaterre's semiotic approach, the play and indirection of signification are inflected with a poststructuralist sense of ethical moment, as a poem's verbal ritual involves the reader in a performance, a 'continual recommencing, an indecisiveness resolved one moment and lost the next with each reliving of revealed significance' (1978: 166). I note that current discussions of play in poetry extend to processes not only of reading but also, as Webb and Carroll (2017) show, of writing and editing a poem and letting it find its form.

[2] Further recent explorations of the interrelation of aesthetic and ethical impulses include Burt on the ways in which poetic language 'can reveal, or upend, the assumptions and habits that go without saying when we use language in less unusual ways'. Keeping the world and language 'weird', poetry can 'sharpen our sense of what we hear and see', or 'keep us alert to the social, political, and economic problems that make our world worse than it could be' (Burt 2016: 4).

[3] McCooey (2014) reflects on his own poem, 'This Voice' (in both print and sonic versions), including the way in which a familiar expression, the 'ordinary experience of a nightly valediction

(“good night”)’ is transformed into a series of mysterious sounds in a ‘creative mix’ of voices known and not known.

[4] Mauss (1973) explores the ways in which a range of capacities (physical, mental and psychological), some of which are important in our sense of being a person, are culturally formed and learned through practice, often step by step.

[5] The Australian Government’s Northern Territory Intervention into remote Indigenous communities began in June 2007, with regulations to ‘protect Aboriginal children’ from abuse, and formally ended in August 2012. There was much controversy over its methods, including the lack of consultation with communities and organisations affected.

[6] Riffaterre (1978: 117) illustrates this principle in Paul Eluard’s ‘Toilette’, where an ‘iconographic theme’ of a woman changing in her room, which has a host of pre-established ‘esthetic values’ in generic scenarios in art and literature, is subject to unexpected variations.

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URL: <https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-vol-11-no-1-jul-2021/lyrical-strategies-and-poetics-place>

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Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973