

The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry

By Thomas Bristow

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Reviewed by Barbara Holloway

PEOPLE WHO HAVE UNDERSTOOD THAT ‘LAWS OF NATURE’ ON PLANET EARTH ARE changing rapidly, unpredictably and frighteningly have responded in different ways: by presenting scientific research and data to the public, by refuting the optimistic or self-interested arguments of sceptics, by attempting to get international action on CO2 emission reductions, on ecological systems or on rising sea-levels. A common concern has been to establish modes of understanding and research into the situations lumped under terms like ‘Anthropocene’, climate change or ‘environmental degradation’.

One recent result has been for scientists and researchers in humanities to work increasingly together. In *The Anthropocene Lyric*, Tom Bristow takes that collaboration in a new direction by showing that the way lyric verse creates relations with place would deepen cultural geography’s account of the earth (5). It is one of the trajectories of this brief, intensely-argued work. Published by Palgrave Macmillan in its 50,000-word Pivot Series, the book can be bought as either individual chapters or the complete volume, meaning each chapter is also a stand-alone essay.

Bristow, until recently a researcher in the Centre for the History of Emotions at the University of Melbourne, is now a lecturer in English Studies at Durham University. His book highlights the need for a new human alertness to the agency, fragility and power of multitudinous presences composing any given place. He begins with the connections between person, affect, place, poetry in terms of existential phenomenology and new materialism. His central tenet—that poetry mediates between ‘personhood’, concrete reality and abstract ideas—goes towards replacing the human/non-human juxtaposition. It is geographer Sarah Whatmore’s term ‘more-than-human’ he adopts

as a focal alternative to the perspective in bio (life) and geo (earth); it celebrates the ‘livingness’ of the world, in which life is technologically

molten ... It is in this space that we are required to rethink our personhood within a larger domain of life. (6)

Where might such rethinking be found? Bristow proposes a specific source is in lyric verse, with its language of felt experience of the world (3). He then suggests that, to better understand an integrated natural and cultural environment, academic disciplines, especially cultural geography, could adopt a relationship of intimacy with material worlds in their practice. He narrows focus again to show how it is pastoral lyric in particular where affect and feeling correlate with modes of valuing and connecting with place. The body of the book then supports this argument through a close reading of verse by three contemporary poets, each presenting a different mode of shared being with the more-than-human.

While Bristow's perspective is grounded in ecocriticism, ecopoetics and geocriticism (12), his enquiry at this time is also explicitly political. A sub-theme throughout is ethical being as engagement with contemporary ecological and climatic realities in late capitalism. The trajectory perhaps originated in the controversy that arose in Britain in 2011 over the T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry, when it emerged that the award was to be partly funded by Aurum Funds, an investment management firm. Of the three poets short-listed, Alice Oswald (*A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, 2009) acted first, stating: 'I think poetry should be questioning not endorsing such institutions and for that reason I'm withdrawing from the Eliot shortlist'.¹ John Kinsella followed her lead and withdrew his collection *Jam Tree Gully* (2012) during the ensuing debate about sponsorship and artists' independence. The organisers elevated other poets to the short list but John Burnside, last of the original short list, was awarded the prize for his volume *Gift Songs* (2007).² Though these events are not mentioned by Bristow, the three volumes—Kinsella's *Jam Tree Gully*, Oswald's *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* and Burnside's *Gift Songs*—are his primary sources. All three are, in very different ways, concerned with the interactive capacity of human, language and world. 'World' is one of a number of terms used in a specialised sense, highlighted in the text and defined in the glossary, in this case 'composed of human and non-human involvements' (129).

Under the heading 'An anthropocene paradigm of place-based personhood' (12) Bristow draws together his theoretical approaches before discussing poems in detail. He describes four 'anchors' holding affective, cultural, and bodily intimacy of being in place. These are conceptualised as (1) '*situatedness*—how the human is situated within its habitat', (2) '*settledness*—how "home" is defined and

¹ <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/06/alice-oswald-withdraws-ts-eliot-prize>>.

² <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/07/ts-eliot-prize-second-poet-sponsor-protest>>.

constructed', (3) 'discreteness—where (or whether) borders or divisions exist between mind and body, body and world, human and other, space and place' and (4) 'placehood—the degree to which we reflect on the other three ideas to develop a critical position on how sense experience constitutes our mental world' (13-14). Discussion of the lyrics is then guided in these terms in a chapter devoted to each poet. Each begins with a biography, a summary of preceding work and an overview of the volume in question.

Australian poet and critic John Kinsella's *Jam Tree Gully* is at first glance a pastoral account in 100 poems of a year returning to his mother's land in Western Australia. Themes include the poet's travel to, arrival at, home making and regeneration work on the bush block. As speaker, Kinsella creates intimacy across time and space in each poem, in Bristow's assessment, by his 'sensitive attention to things', which interact with each other and thus create their environment, the place (31, 33). The iconic 'jam trees' of the title, for example, grow in the district and are present throughout the volume as comfort for the scent they give off as firewood and also as discomfort, fueling wild fires that also characterise the place. The poet avoids conventional hierarchies and metanarratives as he presents speaker-as-body at work—on the roof, taking down fences being one among many bodies, but he also employs a very familiar model of alienated Australian personhood in a non-urban space, as heir to invaders, colonisers, alienated from neighbours with their different practices and views. *Jam Tree Gully* reprises Thoreau in *Walden*, which about a third of the poems reference even as they critique a European heritage.

Bristow discusses 'Sacred Kingfisher and Trough' in full. The speaker pumps up underground water and fills a stock-trough during a prolonged heatwave. He sees a kingfisher perched motionless above it. The poem 'registers the disturbed ground in the failed dialogue between subject and object' (34) in resolutely prosaic terms:

This morning I saw a sacred kingfisher
in an overhanging branch, eying the water....
The sacred kingfisher saw me and remained.
That's unusual—they are mostly cautious.
I over-invest the 'sacred' in their name—name
giving, name evoking statistics from those
who've probably not even seen the bird.

Always working out connections, for the speaker the action of drawing up water brings to consciousness a literary tradition 'dead' and useless to himself and the bird:

I did not know how much noise was within
the bird's head. I thought of Thoreau
thinking of Alexander the Great carrying
the Iliad in a special casket. ... Water-troughs
look like coffins, like caskets. I expected
the sacred kingfisher to swoop as if the shallow
water held nourishment. (quoted in Bristow 35-36)

The 'noise' in the poet's 'head' is the trough of associations, lifeless for the poet just as the trough's water is 'dead' in the bird's presence. The trough-shaped poem nonetheless supplies 'life' to the reader in the submerged narrative of Alexander carrying his copy of Homer as he set off to invade Central Asia, the beginnings of the empire-building that Thoreau, Kinsella and Bristow are, like most of us, ineluctably heirs to.

Kinsella's uncomfortable and specific dwelling is not found in John Burnside's *Gift Songs*, where 'placehood' and 'settledness' are constructed very differently from Jam Tree Gully, according to Bristow. Burnside's volume is characterised by contrast as sparse and learned poetics and inquiry into the operation of meaning in a world that is generalised:

The earth, the grass
And what the body offers of itself
To any journey; any secret thing
That passes in the dark and flits away
Not self, but history: not self, but place ('Ny-Hellesund' 1: 17-21;
quoted in Bristow 64)

Burnside seems often to be settled in temporal being, alert to 'the voices calling from the present tense... the here and now' (Burnside quoted at 72). Places are named as in 'Ny-Hellesund', the title above, as locations of a perception or experience; situatedness and home are in ways of thinking, not physical place. Burnside has a 'poetic apparatus' he describes as 'ecopoetic liturgy', (quoted at 66) drawing out a European spiritual tradition that Bristow traces from the preoccupation of Modernists such as T. S. Eliot with loss and time, back to St Augustine's understanding of mortality and resurrection (51). Despite his immersion in this theological, liturgical tradition, Burnside's natural world is made not by divine creation but by the moment the poet works for, when human, language and world come together 'in an act of co-creation between poet and environment' (74).

Co-creation also underpins Anthropocene personhood, as Bristow conceives it. His skill in combining literary explication and theoretical demonstration of the

affective and material quality of the lyric is most evident for me in his discussion of Alice Oswald's *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*. Oswald's poetic voice, at first obviously influenced by Ted Hughes, is now well-recognised and acclaimed (most recently winning both the Costa Prize for Poetry and the Griffin Prize in 2016-17). *A Sleepwalk* observes and intimately describes a bioregion of the River Severn in south-west England. The dynamic made of river, more-than-human world and affective engagement is evident from the opening lines:

Flat stone sometimes lit sometimes not
 One among many moodswung creatures
 That have settled in this beautiful
 Uncountry of an Estuary (3: 1-4; quoted in Bristow 80)

The slow-changing existence of the very stones is imagined in this rendering of the estuary. After introducing Oswald's environmental aesthetic, Bristow emphasises the phenomenological cast in her 'place-based personhood'. Voice is given to ten such 'persons' including birdwatcher, fisherman, wind and moon. Oswald, the 'dream secretary' 'records' them as they repeatedly visit a small 'foothold' on the sands at night. Bristow draws attention to her alertness to the being of things even in her lay-out of lines on the page though his focus is on the emotional qualities which he argues enable dynamics 'passing through entities that are dramatically open to change (as affective subjects)' (84).

As with *Jam Tree Gully* and *Gift Songs*, Bristow tests ecocritical concepts against *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* under subheadings such as 'Forming environmentally: the locus of labour' (82) 'The corporealised imaginary,' (101) and 'An affective habitus' (100). In the substantial Conclusion, he revisits each poet to discuss situatedness under 'Territory', (115), settledness under 'Estrangement' (119) and discreteness as 'Identification' in 'the first ecocritical paradigm of Anthropocentric personhood' (120). These headings gesture to a need for further inquiry. While certainly topical, a broad-ranging and complex work like Bristow's is not entirely well-served by the word-limit though some of the disadvantages are offset by an abstract and keywords at the beginning of each chapter, the glossary, and a generous bibliography and index.

It should also be said that *The Anthropocene Lyric* is itself written with alertness to language and receptiveness to minutiae of the biophysical world. It is a rich contribution to the capacity of Environmental Humanities to theorise the constitution of immanent knowledge in the light of the Anthropocene, to rethink the culture that accepts the simple dichotomy of 'A land of droughts and flooding rains'.

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