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A Romantic Entanglement with Ecopoetry

Abstract:

This paper proposes that the Romantic perception of nature has been unsettled by creative expressions in contemporary ecopoetry. Contemporary ecopoetry critiques Romantic notions of nature and the sublime. New literary perspectives and practices reflect observations of an environment in flux, undergoing change and giving rise to new questions. This paper will explore the work of two poets, and analyse the ways in which their work inherits and deviates from the tenets of Romanticism. The two poets under consideration, Charlotte Smith (1749-1806) and Alice Oswald (1966-), although distant in time from one another, create compositional interactions of life processes across time and space.

Biographical note:

Anne Stuart is a doctoral candidate at Queensland's Griffith University. Her doctoral project seeks to read the poetry of Scottish environmental poet Kathleen Jamie through the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas; and read the poetry of French materialist poet Francis Ponge through the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical imagination. Her primary research interests include phenomenology, ethics, hermeneutics, new materialism and ecopoetry. Anne is a poet and won the Griffith University School of Humanities Poetry Prize in 2015.

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Creative Writing – Romanticism – ecopoetry – entanglement – sublime

This paper shows how contemporary ecopoetry, influenced by Romanticism, now practices a form of poetic engagement which is informed by 'ecological interrelatedness and entanglement' (Fisher-Wirth & Street 2013: xxiv). A close reading of the work of English poets Charlotte Smith (1749–1806) and Alice Oswald (1966–), although distant in time from one another, shows how their work inherits elements of the sublime and at the same time deviates from the tenets of Romanticism. Especially relevant to this discussion is Romanticism's understanding of nature. Onno Oerlemans characterises the Romantic view of nature as 'a materialistic fate … a transcendent power … a conservative notion of the proper telos of culture, or the material world itself, often reduced or idealised to mere scenery or landscape' (2002: 31). Smith and Oswald share an understanding of elements of the sublime inherited from Romanticism yet they challenge the idea of alienation between humans and nature.

By way of brief introduction, nature in the seventeenth century was often considered by Europeans to be repulsive and hostile, or at least confronting. 'The Wonders of the Peake' (1681) describes Derbyshire as 'A country so deformed, the traveller / Would wear those parts Nature's pudenda were' (Charles Cotton in Marlins 1996: 8), and Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century postulated in the *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) that the horror caused by nature came from awe and exultation, declaring that 'astonishment … is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect' (Part II, Section I). A very brief outline of 'the sublime' follows as its sentiment impacts on culture and literary tradition – and provides background to my provocation.

The treatise 'On the Sublime' attributed to Longinus in the first century, imagined that for language of the sublime to be really noble in thought it needed to be 'strong and hard to efface' (Longinus in Harmon 2003: 84). The sublime subsequently translated as a language of grandeur, and intensity of passion and expression. True sublimity, Mary Warnock (2015) posits, 'arises from the elevation and moral loftiness of the thought that lies behind it, and this nobility of ideas spills out into the words' (2015: 81). Christopher Hitt (1999) argues that there is (in the evaluation of the aesthetic sublime) an asymmetrical power relationship between humans and nature, and the '… discourse of the sublime has operated to confirm the authority and autonomy of a subject over and against a threatening other' (1999: 603). He continues by making the case for understanding the contradiction in the sublime which includes 'humbling fear' and 'ennobling validation' for the perceiving subject, and that the latter was given more attention by eighteenth-century critics. In a brief paraphrase of Warnock's view, sublimity is in fact an aesthetic category, a vocabulary of taste associated with the 'picturesque' and 'beautiful.'

In Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1979: Bk 1, ll: 490-95: 54), the poet says 'ye presences of Nature … / Such ministry … / Haunting me …. / Of danger or desire, and thus did make / The surface of the universal earth / With triumph, and delight, and hope, and fear.' He defines the sublime as 'By the impressive discipline of fear / By pleasure and repeated happiness – / So frequently repeated …' (Bk 1, ll: 632-34: 62). Briefly, Wordsworth's exultation is a place of solitude, idealised, of 'beauteous forms' where ... 'oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din / Of towns and cities, I have owed to them / In hours of weariness, sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart; / And passing even into my purer mind, / With tranquil restoration' ('Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey …' ll: 25-30). This brief recapitulation of aspects of the Romantic sublime, partly expressed in the work of Wordsworth, is particularly germane to Charlotte Smith as Wordsworth's contemporary. And, in the twentieth century, Alice Oswald revisited and transformed such Romantic perspectives in her poetry.

Robert Hass (Fisher-Wirth & Street 2013) suggests contemporary poetry can be regarded under three groupings: first, nature poetry shaped by romanticism; second, environmental poetry (emerging from nature poetry) engaged with political environmentalism; and finally, ecological poetry (2013: xxvii-xxix). Tom Bristow sees contemporary nature poetry as one of 'lost worlds to be lamented and remembered' (2015: 4), and ecological poetry as one where, in mediating between concrete reality and abstract ideas, 'language distinguishes itself from the systems that order and represent human experience … where the human experience shows [itself] to be part of the more-than-human world' (2015: 5).

Nowhere is the divide between Romanticism and ecological poetry more evident than in Bristow's construal of the human experience as being *part of* the more-than-human world. Val Plumwood identifies ecopoetical literatures as having an 'open[ness] to experiences of nature as powerful, agentic and creative [making] space … for an animating sensibility and vocabulary' (2009: 126), which was only partly evidenced in Romanticism, but not embraced. Angela Hume (2012), in an interview with several ecopoets, found that each poet had different perspectives on the characteristics and qualities of ecopoetry, yet all felt that ecopoetry needs to be intense and unpredictable, needs to establish relationships with all manner of things, as well as acknowledge disconnections and sites of convergence. These recognised poets maintain that language needs to be nuanced and textured and remain open to the incompleteness of its own organisation.

Forrest Gander and John Kinsella argue that ecopoems are able to initiate a dispersal of ego-centred agency; that they can be self-reflexive (in that the poem originating in the landscape gives back to the landscape); that permanence and unity can be eschewed in favour of encounter; and that patterning is given attention and objectivity needs to be reoriented toward intersubjectivity (Gander & Kinsella 2012: 11). In discussing the work of Alice Oswald, Martin Harrison (2010) and Angus Fletcher (2004) contend that ecopoems even in their shapelessness, can be grounded by coherence among their different parts and contain diverse phenomena and different perceptions. These writers attest to the elegant construction of Oswald's work and the foreshadowed development of ecopoetry in Charlotte Smith's late work. Both of these poets, although separated by time 'engage questions of form most directly, not only poetic form but also a form historically taken for granted – that of the singular coherent self' (Fisher-Wirth & Street 2013: xxix).

To consider the elements that make contemporary ecopoems successful one needs to look at 'the poet's means and materials' (Gander & Kinsella 2012: 1). Nature is not neat, nor are these ecopoems, insomuch as they stay open-ended; they use the tools of metaphor and association to address the larger ecological issues of our time. The poem's form will not always be well structured and quickly clear. This replicates nature's chaotic semblance: 'The poetry can look strange and wild on the page; is often described as experimental; and it tends to think in self-reflexive ways about how poems can be ecological or somehow enact ecology' (Fisher-Wirth 2013: xxix). Ecopoems need to be fragmentary and ultimately (and not in contradiction) have a sense of 'wholeness' and integrity within and between the disparate parts. Martin Harrison and Angus Fletcher propose that the ecopoem, by allowing for an open-ended assembly, a compositional formation that never closes down nor a single representation of a concept, can then become much like the successional development in an ecology.

'Beachy Head' (1807), a poem of 731 lines by Charlotte Smith, exemplifies the richness of ideas in Smith's poetry from the early nineteenth century, and it represents a challenge to the cultural ideas of her time. It also demonstrates an intuitive grasp of rendering the successional development of modern ecopoetics. Although written not long after William Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' (1798), Smith's work stands as contrast to that of her contemporaries. Composed in short lined blank-verse, the emblematic feature in 'Beachy

Head' is the representation of a significant place and the forces that shape its natural and human history. Grounding her poem in beliefs seemingly counter to that of her age, she demonstrates through language and structure, a foreshadowing of the long feedback-loops, record-like note taking, temporal movement, layered meaning, and fragments and digressions as flux so characteristic of contemporary ecopoetry.

The poem meanders in structurally controlled verse between contemplative moments, evolutionary time, evocations of memory and a history of place. The lines on the page resemble shorts bursts of thought, and the vocalised musings and contemplations suggest the rhythms of the traditional walking tours of the poets of her time. Her verse moves between 'ecologies' of space and place. She subverts the standard conventions of her period, using tropes her audience would be familiar in order to construct a veiled parody of the sublime.

For example, the following lines from 'Beachy Head' are both engaged with and yet finally resistant to the sublime as Smith's language, concepts and tropes challenge prevailing notions. Her first line, 'On thy stupendous summit, rock sublime!' suggests that the rest of the poem will be complicit with an understanding of the sublime as expressed by her contemporaries. Subsequently, 'Omnipotent' (ll: 6) further secures an expectation that this poem will be consistent with such Wordsworthian lines as 'Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart'. Nevertheless, the work deviates from the Romantic ideal. Following evocative and grand descriptions of nature, the poem switches its location to a scene of fishing vessels. After lengthy meditation on the ocean and its human actors it then chronicles a long history and invasion of place, finally turning to specifics:

> How gladly the reflecting mind returns
>
> To simple scenes of peace and industry
>
> Where, bosom'd in some valley of the hills
>
> Stands the one farm; its gate with tawny ricks
>
> Surrounded … (1807: ll: 168-72).

The astute change in temporal structure foreshadows Smith's deft critique of the Romantic turn, where she creates verses of textured description which move through an idyllic landscape populated by one who 'braves himself' (ll: 184) against the elements. The lines then begin to loop back and forth in time and season, observing – as does contemporary ecopoetry – the seasons and cycles, time and space in flux. Like Wordsworth, Smith comments on the cityscape with 'polluted smoky atmosphere / and dark stifling streets' before throwing her perspective 'higher still' (ll: 309) to a bird's-eye view of flowers and plants, referencing the sublime. She is momentarily 'an early worshipper at Nature's shrine' (ll: 346). However, her resistance to the sublime is also evident:

> Ah! hills so early loved! in fancy still
>
> I breathe your pure keen air; and still behold
>
> Those widely spreading views, mocking alike
>
> The Poet and the Painter's utmost art.
>
> And still, observing objects more minute,
>
> Wondering remark the strange and foreign forms
>
> Of sea-shells ... (ll: 368-74).

Knowingly, her ecologies of 'objects more minute' are never far from reflection as she constructs an original textual landscape of felt place, entangling humans with the material

world of rivers, rocks, plants, earth and sky in an ever-increasing intensity. Her ecopoetic linguistic structure is astonishing for her time. The following lines could easily have been written by a contemporary poet:

> And the bird's foot trefoil, and the lesser tribes
>
> Of hawkweed; spangling it with fringed stars (ll: 454-55).

Smith, in line with the practice of her contemporaries, weaves into her text the Stranger and the Wanderer, but she de-centres them, integrating her human actors in the natural world where they are subsumed by natural forces. This is revealed in the poem's final lines 'where Beachy overpeers the channel wave' (ll: 672) and where waves waft the body of the hermit who 'receiv'd the rites of burial' (ll: 725-726). Finally, Smith shows how her structured reflection on the terrain of Beachy Head can both engage with and deviate from the tenets of Romanticism.

My provocation is that Charlotte Smith's poetry is consistent with some of the broader shifts in contemporary ecopoetry toward an open-ended assembly, fragments, a succession and the breaking off and reengaging – all within the 'trembling sublime' (Backscheider 2005: 366). Her work also points towards our current understanding of humanity's simultaneous separation from and link with nature, creating a natural-human connection. It acts as palimpsest, both reflecting the nineteenth century's scratched layered chalk cliffs of Beachy Head as accretions/sedimentations of time, partially preserving the texture (literal and metaphoric) it had before subsequent metamorphosis. 'Those who read / chisel'd within the rock' is her textual place.

Smith successfully constructs a fashioning of a sublime landscape through her poetic images and language to match the grandeur of her peers, investing it with characters and voices, but she also successfully confronts this tradition and opens it out for further interpretation and exploration. This is *not* meant to 'ecologise' her writing, but to reveal her poetic sensibilities and see her poetry as a latent precursor. Charlotte Smith's 'Beachy Head' was published posthumously and whether intended or not, its final lines remain a nuanced textual fragment. If Smith sought to deviate from or even contest the tenets of Romanticism and construct a text open to further readings and connections, then she succeeded.

The practice of leaving text open to further interpretation can often be unsettling, yet this particular type of open-ended 'textual ecology' has potential to complicate and enrich the ideas of a text on the page. Alice Oswald inherits Romantic tenets yet she speaks through diverse and contemporary linguistic registers and constructs varied textual arrangements. Her textual rendering and creative enjambment (among other devices) appear to manifest the qualities of the subjects she describes, as if enacting its own ecology. Her use of lines without end-stopping is reflective of an impulsiveness and naturalness which abrades the formal need for traditional structure and rhythmic patterns – as in the following lines from 'April'.

> The sheer grip and push of it – growth gets
>
> a footledge in the loosest stems, it takes
>
> the litterings of weeds and clocks them round:
>
> your eyeballs bud and alter and you can't
>
> step twice in the same foot – I know a road
>
> the curve throw it one way and another …
>
> (Oswald 2007: 12).

The reverence Oswald pays to the seasons and nature trace their lineage back to the Romantics, while her structural patterns, style and versification typify contemporary ecopoetry. In the above poem, Oswald's words actualise the movement of energy in the environment of the Northern Hemisphere Spring. The vernacular for her textured ecology includes gripping and pushing, growth getting a 'footing', the movement in the image of 'clocks them around', turning and entangling, and the litter of weeds backwards and forwards. She imparts a thrilling rhythmic movement connecting the reader with the ecology. Such expressive energy and movement in the lines, the breaking off lines into pieces of syntax, along with a slightly disordered, entangled pattern of words, cause a neurological reaction in the reader somewhat akin to vertigo.

Similarly, in 'Sea Sonnet' (Oswald 2007: 15) the movement in phrases such as 'island flirting *up* and *down*', 'goes *in between*', 'The sea *crosses*', 'weir's *curves* / are *moving in* the wind-*bent* acts of *waves', '*swallow *up* and *sink', 'nothing* but the sea-like sea *beyond',* (emphasis added) connects elements of water and words in intricate multidimensional relationships. The phrases progress and strengthen over the length of the poem and these poetic structures become linguistic manifestations of the dynamic, ever-changing flux of the environment.

The vitality and chaotic semblance of 'April' and 'Sea Sonnet' stand in contrast to her poem 'Dunt – a poem for a nearly dried up river' (Oswald 2007: 135). 'Dunt' uses the Romantic breath of the Roman water nymph as a feminine figurative instrument to 'summon a river out of limestone' (135). Oswald bears witness to the declining ecology of the river from the beginning of the poem through to its conclusion. The river, represented by the water nymph, is: 'damaged and quite dry' (135), 'very eroded faded' (135), 'Exhausted, utterly worn down' (135), 'very endangered now' (135), and 'a river more nettles than water' (137). The water nymph tries to pour 'pure outwardness out of a grey urn' (135) but the river is a 'Very speechless, very broken old woman' (137). The personification complete, Oswald, seeking lost nature, finishes with the compelling lines:

> And they say oh they say
>
> in the days of better rainfall
>
> it would flood through five valleys,
>
> there'd be cows and milking stools
>
> washed over the garden walls
>
> and when it froze, you could skate for five miles. Yes go on.
>
> Little loose end shorthand unrepresented
>
> beautiful disused route to the sea,
>
> fish path with nearly no fish in (Oswald 2007: 138).

'Dunt' observes the decline and flux of seasons in its evocations of the ecology of the river Dunt. Through the metaphorical summoning of the water nymph it affords aesthetic delight yet Oswald moves from subjectivity to an embodied objectivity as she narrates the observed ecology of the river and calls up memories of the river's past. There is no trace of a majestic sublime in the face of incontrovertible evidence of change. This poem supports Tom Bristow's view that contemporary nature poetry reminds readers of the Romantic trope of 'lost worlds to be lamented and remembered' (2015: 4), while disengaging from the Romantic 'where the human experience shows [itself] to be part of the more-than-human world' (2015: 5).

Echoes of lost worlds and the Romantic sublime are whispered in Oswald's 'Mountains' (2007). Here 'Something is in the line and air along edges' is reminiscent of Wordsworth's 'Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart'. Oswald captures the sublime without asking us to trust in the metaphysical:

> Something is in the line and air along edges,
> which is in woods when the leaf changes
> and in the leaf-pattern's gives and gauges,
> the water's tension upon ledges.
> Something is taken up with entrances,
> which turns the issue under bridges.
> The moon is between places.
> An outlet fills the space between two horses (Oswald 2007: 22).

Alice Oswald nestles the sublime into 'something' (repeated six times) – the nameless, 'the unnamed, possibly unnameable' (Farrier 2014: 7). We are not asked to feel fear or awe, and just as with Charlotte Smith's poem, we are asked to think about our 'queerness' insomuch as our inability to linguistically capture temporal moments 'where our minds condense / and then inslides itself between moments / and spills the heart from its circumference' (Oswald 2007: 22). Oswald has said that in her use of gaps, (for example 'An outlet fills the space …' and 'look through a holey stone') she '… attempt[s] to close the gap between the self and the natural world' (Daniels & Saunders 2010: 4).

Images of circles and closing circles and filling gaps fill imaginary spaces. If one were to consider the sublime's association with fear, notions of the sublime may be identified in her dexterous invocations of change and temporality in words such as 'edges', 'changes', 'ledge', 'balance'. However, it is the lines '… and you can feel by instinct in the distance / the bigger mountains hidden by the mountains, / like intentions among suggestions' (Oswald 2007: 22) that connect to Wordsworth's terror intended, and the idea of awe hidden and then revealed by imagination. The implication is that the might of nature is too great for one mind or linguistic system, filling the Oswaldian gap in our imagination. These lines bring the other-than-human into view and allude to the ontology of the mountains – the idea that 'in the distance / the bigger mountains [are] hidden by the mountains' and can be 'felt by instinct'. Such images are integral to the Romantic imagination, understanding as it does what is 'Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart' (Wordsworth 1798: n.p.), yet they transform this characteristic Romantic gesture into something rather problematic, as if we cannot, after all, see what we believe we understand.

In Oswald's poem 'Dart' (2007) flow and flux are skilfully articulated in a tapestry of linguistic registers, narrating the flow of the river Dart, a flux in contrast to the characteristic Romantic sensibility of continuance reflected in Wordsworth's 'River Duddon, After-Thought' – 'I see what was, and is, and will abide' (Wordsworth 1820: n.p.). Oswald's poem works a revision and transformation of the romantic sublime, integrating human and non-human elements into her work through open form, emblematic of the shape and movement of the river. She constructs a romance of voices in dialogue and from an apparent transcription of both recalled encounters and precise recordings, transforms a landscape into phonic linguistic textures.

There is a similarity between how Oswald and Smith construct their work. Each poet provides their readers with support frameworks as they change voices and characters and add various kinds of commentary. This technique provides the nexus between the private and the public, as their landscapes become a place of cultural interactions and contemplations. It also becomes a history – very clearly in both poems – that each poet orders over time through their own perspectives and voices, coupled with descriptions of characters and terrain. It is the latter which is the foundation of Oswald's 'Dart', the river

itself, the unequivocal symbol of the life forces that shape it and its human and non-human others. The structure of the poem reflects the river's meanderings: short lines, lengthier lines and dense tracts. There are sections in its 45 pages where the syntax is sonic and provocative, as in 'tufting felting hanks tops spindles slubbings' (Oswald 2007: 63), and the technique of labelling and enumerating forms part of a complex linguistic texture – the poet reflecting on and transcribing visual and auditory impressions of land, water, human and non-human – and her sometimes long unmetered lines are counterbalanced with rhyming couplets, not only paying homage to prosody's romantic inheritance but creating a variegated and entangled poetic ecology. As per Harrison and Fletcher's previously quoted comment on the general characteristics of ecopoetry, 'Dart''s shapelessness is grounded by the coherence among its different parts that contain so many of the river's diverse phenomena and expressions.

In summary, Alice Oswald's poems are examples of how contemporary ecopoetry is able to engage with the dispersal of ego-centred agency, originating in the landscape and giving back to the landscape and favouring the encounter without expressing overt preconceptions or judgement. Such poetry shows human beings interacting with nature in flux. In reflecting on the construction of 'Dart', Oswald reveals that the poetic work for her is 'finished but not necessarily complete' (Oswald 2016: n.p.). As with the river and its voices which go on through time, her work encompasses both the sublime of Longinus and the flux and animating linguistic sensibility of ecopoets, that is 'in memory … strong and hard to efface' (Longinus in Harmon 2003: 84).

Both Charlotte Smith and Alice Oswald reinterpret and contest the inherited romantic view of nature as an asymmetrical power relationship and successfully offer a deep and articulate sense of connection to place. Smith's final poem provides a vehicle for her to move beyond the constraints of the nature poem as dictated by her Romantic contemporaries, and Oswald's contemporary interpretative practices lend a fresh voice and style to Romantic themes and perspectives on the natural world. Neither of these poets, in their contemplation of the natural world, structures their poetry to contain a subject over and against a threatening 'other'. Their poetries manifest, even in their relative shapelessness or disconnections, as significant sites of convergence.

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