

**UNNATURAL RELATIONS? LANGUAGE AND NATURE IN THE POETRY OF
MARK DOTY AND LES MURRAY**

by

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What can words do

*but link what we know
to what we don't
and so form a shape?*

(From 'Difference' by Mark Doty)

In an essay entitled 'Nature and Silence', Christopher Manes makes an important connection between language and our perception of nature. In our culture, he says, 'nature is silent...in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative.' He goes on to say,

'[t]he language we speak today, the idiom of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism, veils the processes of nature with its own cultural obsessions, directionalities, and motifs that have no analogues in the natural world. As Max Oeschlaeger puts it, "we are people who presumably must think of the world in terms of the learned categorical scheme of Modernism." It is as if we had compressed the entire buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology, to the point that someone like Georg Luckacs could say "nature is a societal category" and actually be understood. (Glotfelty and Fromm, p.15)

Later in the same essay, Manes, arguing for a view of nature and the human based on deep ecology, discusses how postmodern philosophy has rudely challenged the 'transcendental narcissism' of the human as 'the unmoved mover of all possible knowledge'(p.22). He closes his essay with a plea for the dismantling of 'a particular historical use of reason, a use that has produced a certain kind of human subject that only speaks soliloquies in a world of irrational silences' (p.25). What Manes doesn't examine is how some aspects of postmodern thought, notably those often termed post-Saussurian or post-structuralist, while acknowledging our relative status in the world, have removed us further from a relationship with nature through various theories of knowledge and language. In fact, such theories could be viewed as a last ditch attempt to maintain the role of reason in defining the human as ontologically superior to the rest of nature. Their emphasis on language as a Nietzschean 'prison house', which presumably keeps humans in and other species out, can only alienate us further from the 'buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere'.

In this essay I want to examine how two contemporary poets, one American, one Australian, have attempted to use language to speak for nature or about nature while avoiding the idioms that ‘veil the processes of nature with our own cultural obsessions, directionalities and motifs’. What is also important about both writers is the manner in which they approach the subject of language itself.

First of all, though, I wish to examine further the relationship between language and reality put forward by post-structuralism. It is perhaps primarily in the work of Jacques Derrida that the apotheosis of such thinking can be detected. Although Derrida’s analyses are often subtler than his critics (and followers) give him credit for, his far-reaching exploration of Saussure’s assertion that ‘in language there are only differences without positive terms’ has launched a thousand critical ships (and sunk a few others). Such an apparent abandoning of any notion of referentiality, that language can actually tell us anything about the world, has important implications for literature, especially a literature which attempts to engage with the otherness of nature. If language cannot relate usefully to a reality ‘out there’, if it is in fact a hermetically sealed system as some theorists suggest, then any attempt to write about a reality ‘out there’ becomes futile. This of course also has important political and social consequences, a theme enlarged upon by Leonard Scigaj in *Sustainable Poetry* (Kentucky, 1999). As he suggests, ‘[t]he divorce of text from socioeconomic and environmental context legitimates the status quo by never calling it into question...’ (p.27).

However, Colin Falck, in *Myth, Truth and Literature* (Cambridge, 1994) offers a comprehensive critique of the post-structuralist analysis of language, ending the book with a claim for literature as ‘our most fundamental mode of inscription of reality’(p.151). Falck is one of a number of critics who have drawn on the work of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. What is interesting about Merleau-Ponty’s work is the way in which he offers an alternative view of language to that put forward by post-structuralism. David Abram draws on this work in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (Vintage, 1997), as does Leonard Scigaj in the aforementioned *Sustainable Poetry*. Although I had not read Scigaj’s *Sustainable Poetry* when I wrote the conference paper on which this essay is based, it seems to me unsurprising that our readings of poets in the light of Merleau-Ponty’s works should be similar. Scigaj’s notion of

referance utilises Merleau-Ponty's theories, particularly his ideas regarding the referential origins of all language. However, it is to Falck's analysis that I now want to turn.

Falck begins by acknowledging Saussure's two basic principles:- 1) the arbitrary nature of the sign and 2) the relational nature of all linguistic meaning.. Falck's argument is not with Saussure, but with those who have extended what was originally 'a set of regulative principles for the reform of language studies' into an 'exhaustive and (give or take certain qualifications) philosophically incontestable account of the essential nature of language itself'(p.6). Falck suggests that this shift in emphasis is based on a fallacy.

From the idea that words do not have their meanings by virtue of their one-to-one correspondences with items in reality, it is inferred *tout court* that language cannot be held to relate in an intelligible or usefully discussible way with any extra-linguistic dimension or 'presence' in reality at all. (p.6)

He goes on to point out that a post-structuralist analysis of language gives little sense of how language ever came about, or how it actually functions and changes in real, or embodied, situations. How, he asks, is language continuously modified if not through the 'exposure of our concepts to contingency within continuously changing physical and perceptual situations?' (p.11).

Falck then proceeds to suggest how language may actually rely on and, in fact, grow out of a 'pre-linguistic mode of life which we share with other inhabitants of our world and which is not yet a realm in which subject and object - or awareness and corporeality - have clearly differentiated themselves'(p.15). Obviously animals are able to differentiate aspects of their world; otherwise they couldn't possibly function. Yet this happens, as far as we can tell, extra-linguistically. How then, Falck asks, might language actually come into being from this pre-linguistic embodied experience? Here he draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty, who suggested that language is in fact an advanced form of expressive bodily gesture. However, this isn't a matter of gesturing 'at already differentiated items in the world, but a process through which any awareness - including our most embryonic awareness of ourselves, and our most embryonic awareness that there is a world around us - is originally established'(p.16). 'The relationship

between language and reality which is here in question,' Falck states, 'is precisely a relationship between verbal language itself and a pre-verbal awareness *for which we feel a need to find a verbal expression*'(p.17). Furthermore, he suggests, it is 'a necessity of language ...that it should always be able to go beyond by means of a process of new articulation out of the incompletely-articulated awareness that we apply to it whenever we use it in new contexts'(p.17). It isn't that Falck sees language as any kind of baptismal naming process. Instead he sees words as 'a gestural or what we might call "directional" apprehension rather than a labeling of already isolated objects or situations'(p.23).

What this leads Falck to is an assertion that the Derridean case against a 'metaphysics of presence' must fail because it doesn't recognise 'any sense of 'otherness' or presence which is a prerequisite of our having any kind of experience of a world of things or persons'(p.20).

What interests me about Falck's argument is that it allows for a 'metaphysics of presence' to re-enter the debate about language and reality without naively returning to the kind of naming-process theory of language originally dismissed by Saussure.

I now want to examine some poems by Mark Doty and Les Murray in the light of these arguments, trying to discover if it is possible to have a poetry of presence which, at the same time, is aware of language's contingency and embeddedness in human value systems.

Mark Doty is perhaps best known for his poems about AIDS and his prose memoir, *Heaven's Coast*. However, in *My Alexandria* (Jonathan Cape, 1995) and *Atlantis* (Jonathan Cape, 1996), there are a number of poems about the natural world, specifically the land and seascapes of Cape Cod. Much of this work has a phenomenological strand running through it, concerning the experience of nature and how to render this in human terms. It is to this that I now want to turn.

In 'Difference', which appears in *My Alexandria*, Doty begins with simile, describing the jellyfish as 'like schools of clouds'. But he then seems to run up against a lack of categories, of useful terms with which to name the jellyfish. 'All they seem is shape and shifting' he says. All he can do is fall back on metaphor to try and evoke their presence in terms we, as embodied language users, can relate to. So each jellyfish is a 'balloon, a breathing heart a pulsing flower, a rolled condom' etc. But more than this, Doty self-consciously acknowledges this process in the poem itself:

This submarine opera's
all subterfuge and disguise,

its plot a fabulous tangle
of hiding and recognition,
nothing but trope... (p.44/45)

Later he describes it as 'recognisable only as the stuff of metaphor'. Metaphor, the coming together of two previously separate concepts to create a new, third concept is vital to an understanding of language which is gestural in origin. In discussing the need to get 'beyond the philosophical limitations of Saussurianism', Falck argues for a model of language which recognises 'the entry of contingency into the relational system and the temporal *moving onwards* of language through the process of insight or intuition'.

Later, on the same page he expands on this linguistic process as one;

which takes us beyond the meanings we already possess and enables us to use our old words in new extra-linguistic contexts; in other words a process through which the sensed, but not yet articulated, presence of an extra-linguistic reality gets itself (literally) incorporated into our linguistic structures.' (p.26)

Doty seems to address this whole notion in the next few lines of the poem:

What can words do

but link what we know
to what we don't
and so form a shape? (p.45)

The rest of the poem, with the exception of two sentences, is then made up of questions.

As it continues, the question form adds a grammatical open-endedness to what is an acknowledgment of the necessarily shifting, open-ended relationship between language and the experience it is describing. So he talks about a shape which is both the thing itself and the metaphor:

which shrinks and swells,
configures or collapses, blooms
even as it is described...(p.45)

Later he admits that

What binds
one shape to another

also sets them apart
- but what's lovelier
than the shapeshifting

transparence of *like* and *as*: (p.45)

The poem finishes with the idea of longing.

Hear how the mouth,

so full
of longing for the world
changes its shape? (p.46)

This longing is similar to Falck's notion of 'fundamental intentionality'(p.37), which leads him to state that 'our vital or purposive involvement with the world must be metaphysically prior to

our conscious or discursive involvement'(p.40). Later, in the same chapter he suggests that '(t)he logical dimension of language arises out of, and must thereafter always continue to depend on, its poetic dimension'(p.51).

In 'Description', from *Atlantis*, (Jonathan Cape 1996), Doty begins the poem with a sentence ending in a question, 'how can I say what it is?', acknowledging that language is always an attempt to grasp what is beyond it, in this case the experience of the marsh. Language isn't a matter of giving already differentiated subjects names, nor is it a prison house from which we cannot escape. Rather, as we have already seen, Falck suggests, it 'must necessarily be seen as a "reaching beyond" into an incompletely-articulated extra-linguistic "presence"(p22). Doty also acknowledges that the marsh is 'inside me and out'. This phenomenological line of thinking and experiencing, made conscious in a number of his other poems, such as 'Migratory', highlights the interdependence of language, thinking and the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the dualistic thinking of subject and object is necessarily false. He sees human beings as embodied in the 'flesh of the world', so that 'inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself'(The *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.40).

In 'Description', Doty goes on to employ rich, sensual metaphors to convey the otherness of the marsh, to try to put into words what is beyond their everyday, sedimented use:

The bud of storm loosens:
water paint poured

dark blue onto the edge
of the page. Haloed grasses,
gilt shadow-edged body of dune...(p.1)

He then breaks off to admit:

I could go on like this.
I love the language
of the day's ten thousand aspects, (p.1)

The poem then becomes an argument about the very act of description itself, as Doty questions whether the particular does in fact lead to the universal. 'What I need...' he says, is 'a heady purity distilled/from detail'. This takes him into a self-confessed metaphor, and a list of 'lush grammar,/a whole vocabulary/of ornament:' ending in a description of it as:

one vast conjugation
of the verb
to *shine*. (p.3)

By way of reference to cultural ideas of shining, he bring us back to the marsh, attempting to evoke it in terms that surprise us and make us see anew:

And that
is the marsh essence -
all the hoarded riches

of the world held
and rivering, a gleam
awakened and doubled

by water...(p.3)

But Doty isn't finished yet. Two lines later, there is again the self-reflexive awareness of the act of description:

Jewellery, tides, language:

things that shine.
What is description, after all,

but encoded desire? (p.3)

The function of this self-reflexivity is to remind us of language's human-centredness, that the poem is an attempt to point beyond language, to something which necessarily lies outside its categories. This is a point developed by Scigaj in his discussion of 'ecopoets' as he describes them as 'actively searching for an originary language that tries to close the gap between words and the intense firsthand experience...' (Scigaj, p.41)

Doty then returns to the phenomenological considerations of the earlier part of the poem:

And if we *say*
the marsh, if we forge
terms for it, then isn't it

contained in us,
a little,
the brightness? (p.3)

Finally then, it is this awareness of the provisional nature of the poem, that something *beyond* language is being gestured at, which gives Doty's poem its energy as an enactment of the phenomenological. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram, discussing Merleau-Ponty's later writings, uses terms which could just as easily be applied to Doty's poem. 'Ultimately, it is not human language that is primary, but rather the sensuous, perceptual life-world, whose wild, participatory logic ramifies and elaborates itself in language' (p.84) .

The title of Les Murray's sequence, *Presence: Translations for the Natural World*, from *Translations from the Natural World* (Carcenet, 1993), immediately alerts us to concerns of presence and language. After all, these are 'translations' rather than the presence itself. The poems are an attempt to speak for nature, the majority being short dramatic monologues by various beings, animate and inanimate, ranging from beetles to strangler figs and even DNA. In

this sense Murray is trying to de-centre human perceptions of life, giving voice to other life forms which, in Manes' terms, would otherwise have no voice, being outside language.

In attempting to present us with the imagined viewpoint of another species, Murray often has to modify the syntax of the language. One particular example of this compression and realignment comes in a poem entitled 'Shoal'. In taking on the voice of the shoal, Murray breaks down the usual distinctions of individuality, of subject and object, that language is built on. So the fish can only conceive of themselves collectively and the play on the two homonyms, 'eye' and 'I' helps us to perceive this. This is overtly stated in 'Eye and eye near no eye/is no I..' He also reaches for metaphors of synaesthesia to describe what we can imagine as the sensings of fish, the 'earblades' which 'listen for the eel's wave gust'. In addition to this Murray utilises the actual sounds of the words to convey a sense of the collectivity of the shoal. So the internal rhyme in 'unison of the whole shoal' unites 'whole' and 'shoal' in an auditory way. Similarly, the end rhymes, for example, 'eye'/'I'/'by'/'eye' and 'Thinks'/'winks'/'drinks'/'Jinx', tie the form together and emphasise the unity of the shoal. Murray also coins new phrases - 'gill-pulse drinks' and 'redfin's gaped gong' - for example. Again this requires a realignment of language and, consequently, of our categories of thought and perception. Scigaj records a similar a similar moment in his discussion of *referance*.

Ecopoets often record *referance* as the precise moment when one recognises that phonetic language is a reified, limited conceptual system of abstract rules and concepts, a product of human logic and reason, whose major function is to point us *outward* toward that infinitely less limited referential reality of nature.
(p.38)

Identity is again an issue in 'Migratory'. Here Murray imagines the bird comprehending itself, not in terms of an isolated ego, but rather its shifting environment. So the poem begins with 'I am the nest that comes and goes,/the egg that isn't now,.'. Distance and flight are experienced as feelings:

'the feeling of here, that stays

and stays, then lengthens out over
the hill of hills and the feedy sea.' (p.52)

When the bird feels the need to migrate, it is as a sense of wrongness:

'I am the wrongness of here, when it
is true to fly along the feeling
the length of its great rightness...' (p.52)

After its long flight, the bird has a sense of 'Right feelings of here arrive with me'. Identity is again expressed in terms of presence and activity:

'I am the nests danced for and now,
I am the crying heads to fill,' (p.52)

While this poem is less radical in its modifications of syntax than a poem like 'Shoal', Murray is trying once again to shift our focus away from habitual and human-centred notions. Lines such as 'I am the right feeling on washed shine,' are attempts to undo the categorical schemes of everyday, sedimented language, to surprise the reader into new perceptions.

In 'From Where We Live On Presence' the 'speaker' of the poem is a beetle, and yet the poem opens with a reference to humanity and language:

A human is a comet streamed in language far down time; no other
living is like it. (p.53)

This initial acknowledgment of our species' reliance on language is in contrast to the beetle's presence, suggesting perhaps our loss of presence, or pure being. Once again Murray has to invent new articulations in order to convey a life very different from our own. So he coins new nouns such as 'sixwalkers' and 'flesh-mobbers' to describe various insects. But more than this, he uses the idea of language itself as a metaphor for being:

Beetlehood itself was my expression.

It was said in fluted burnish, in jaw-tools, spanned running, lidded
shields... (p.53)

Whereas communal insects such as ants ‘merge mouths in/communion/and taste their common being’, the beetle is solitary and self-contained: ‘I mated once, escaped a spider, ate things cooked in wet fires of decay/but for the most part, was.’ Any attempt to describe or analyse its being will always fall short of what it really is.

I could not have put myself better,
with more lustre, than my presence did. I translate into segments,
laminates,
cachou eyes, pungent chemistry, cusps. But I remain the true word for
me. (p.53)

The poem is a ‘translation’ from the thing itself, the being of the beetle, which cannot be fully rendered in any way except by itself. What the poem can do is use signs to point towards this being, which is itself beyond language. These final lines also bring us back to the idea of the presence of an animal such as the beetle as being qualitatively different to that of human language users, whose sense of lack which might be construed as stemming from a reliance on sign making at the expense of direct experience.

Murray, I feel, uses the sequence as a whole not only to alert us to the possibility of other forms of being in the world, but also as a call to reinvest our lives with a sense of lived physical experience in ‘the sensuous, perceptual life-world’.

To conclude, my intention has been to show how two poets have tried to speak for and about nature in ways which, while acknowledging the provisional nature of language and meaning, do lead us back to a sense of a lived, embodied experience in the world. In particular, their use of metaphor is central. As Shelley stated in his *Defence of Poetry*, poetry is ‘vitaly metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations between things and perpetuates their

apprehension' (in Falck, p.55). But I also believe metaphor to be at the heart of an understanding of language which can take us beyond the sterile arguments of post-structuralism. Yes, language is a set of fixed terms, a kind of grid laid over the world to try and contain and understand it. But as it comes into contact with pre-linguistic experience, that intuitive, expressive part of ourselves which Falck describes, language is modified, re-made to try and describe presences which are outside its terms. Metaphor reinscribes reality, taking two unlike terms to create a new, third term, or, in Doty's words, 'form a shape'. This is, of course, at the core of the idea of poets as those who renew the language, of literature as a kind of linguistic front line where new meanings are constantly made and re-made. As embodied language users, at work within 'the flesh of the visible', poets are part of an on-going feedback system between language and the world, not locked in a prison house but wildly ramifying.

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