

Estuary: Brian Walter's Swartkops Poems

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Abstract

Estuaries are amongst our most treasured and threatened coastal spaces. Tidal, ecologically unique, and preternaturally vulnerable to human interference, estuaries may be seen as particularly rich bioregions where notions of belonging, ecological fragility, and existential liminality may be explored. Port Elizabeth's Swartkops estuary is amongst our most damaged, sandwiched as it is between the suburbs of Bluewater Bay and the townships of New Brighton, the bridge of the N2, the factories of North End. Brian Walter, erstwhile Hogsback resident, now living in Port Elizabeth, was shown the treasures and pains of the Swartkops by his father, and has written regularly about this diminutive bioregion of growth and memory. It has become an inescapable component of his identity. This conjunction of identity and place – both shifting, moody, at some level *unplaceable* – is the central theme of Walter's primary estuarine sequence from the 1999 collection *Tracks*, the nine-poem cycle entitled 'Swartkops'. This paper explores that cycle in relation to some brief comments on ecology, metaphor, and other forms of relevant discourse.

Keywords: estuary, Brian Walter, ecocriticism, poetry

A peculiar feature of environmental questions is how very soon they reach the limits of the competence of any one intellectual discipline (Clark 2011:4).

Ecologically-orientated literary critics have been subjected of late to various calls to familiarise themselves with scientific ecology in order to gain increased traction – increased relevance – in the current cultural-environmental rhetorical landscape. In an important but probably forgotten 1992 essay, Ivan Rabinowitz launched a stinging and eloquent broadside at what he then regarded as the ‘enfeebled discipline’ of orthodox, Arnoldian literary studies whose exponents knew ‘very little about ‘Nature’ or the ‘Environment’,’ next to nothing about ‘the chemistry of nutrient cycles, nothing about the classification of food chains, nothing about complexity-stability theory, nothing about the laws of ecological succession’, and more (Rabinowitz 1992:19 - 20). While this may remain true of many literary scholars, the phenomenal growth of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment in the USA and elsewhere points to a turning of the tide. Nevertheless, Glen Love, eleven years after Rabinowitz, argues that ‘finding out what it means to be human’ is crucially dependent on knowledge of the ‘life-sciences’ (Love 2003:6). Given that the scientific and the socio-managerial modes of tackling global environmental problems are now unquestionably predominant, there is wisdom and pragmatism in this call. It particularly addresses the edge of activism towards which even scholarly ecocriticism is impelled, since an activism unsupported by science is increasingly liable to be dismissed as hysterically emotive and therefore discountable. It also has implications for the accusation, as levelled by Dana Phillips at eco-writers like Lawrence Buell and Barry Lopez, for instance, of ecocriticism’s habitual and simplistic default to varieties of ‘romantic’ ‘inner landscapes’, to a belief in transparent representationalism in language, and to an isolated ‘pastoral’ focus on an individual’s heightened experience of a putative but illusory ‘natural’ idyll (Phillips 2003:7 - 11).

In this essay, I want partly to agree with Phillips that ‘ecology’ itself needs to be ‘disenchant[ed]’ (41), its actual tentativeness noted, and to suggest that Walter evinces an appropriate self-deprecation amounting almost to pessimism. I also want to note the limitations on scientific and managerial discourses of environmental stewardship, and to suggest that, while residues of Romanticism do persist in contemporary poetry such as Brian Walter’s, it does neither Romanticism nor the poets (especially white poets) any service to stereotype them as politically unaware or socially sealed-off. Further, what one might term the ‘thick language’, the heightened

metaphoric mode of poetry itself, suggests that far from being eliminated by ecological statistics or sociological modelling, the sites, modes, and expressions of individuals' 'heightened experience' ought to remain central to an understanding of environmental problems and vital to their potential solutions. In short, there is an 'emotional quotient' to *all* social issues, including those affecting 'natural' environments, which scientific ecological studies simply do not address.

This is not to disparage the important, indeed vital, science being conducted, only to focus on the modes and rhetorical strategies by which science does what it does. It is not to fall into an oversimplified, C.P. Snow-like dichotomy of the scientific and humanistic disciplines, or to accede entirely to the 'disenchantment thesis' – the proposition that rationalistic science has robbed the natural world of any but instrumental value (Clark 2011:143). It is not a simplistic attempt to equate science as a research discipline (let alone 'ecology', frequently not seen as a proper science at all) with the industrial technologies which actually end up damaging sensitive ecosystems¹, nor to equate science with consequent managerial protection plans, even when those plans claim to be based rationalistically on that science. It is striking, however, to note the instrumentalist, anthropocentric language of, for instance, a 'Coastal Management Advisory Programme' to 'Protect Our Estuaries'. This pamphlet outlines the workings and biodiversity of estuaries (the kind of thing ecologists study) and proclaims them 'valuable' – but valuable because they are (in a bold headline) 'economically important' to 'commercial and recreational anglers', for 'healthy relaxation' (for humans, that is), and because 'they generate income through tourism, boating and sport fishing' (Department of Environmental Affairs, n.d.). A related rhetorical structure and mode characterises draft

¹ One example of the worrying disjunct, perhaps even ignorance, of discourses and values emerged recently when coal-mining adjacent to the ecologically and culturally sensitive Mapungubwe region of Limpopo was re-started after a moratorium; Coal of Africa CEO John Worthington made the utterly mystifying and misleading statement that, 'For us, conservation is a natural resource' (*Mail & Guardian* supplement 'Responsible Mining', October 28 2011: 1).

Integrated Management Plans produced for the Swartkops by Cape Action for People and the Environment (C.A.P.E.)²:

The Situation Assessment Report provided a sound basis from which to set a realistic and achievable Vision, as well as Strategic Objectives for the Swartkops Estuary and associated Nature Reserves. It also ensured that, at the time of the stakeholder workshops, expectations were aligned with the opportunities and constraints of the ecological and socio-economic environments prevailing at the time. The developed Vision and Strategic Objectives may not conflict with that developed for the CFR, and Strategic Objectives should form the foundation for quantitative Operational Objectives. Subsequent to extensive public participation, it became apparent that a Mission statement would also be required (Enviro-Fish 2010:3.1).

One notes here the stress on ‘align[ment]’ and ‘development’ (an ideologically heavily invested term nowadays) and the overarching appeal to ‘reason’ and ‘quantitative’ criteria. One queries the hidden assumptions behind what makes a ‘foundation’ ‘sound’ or what is ‘prevailing’ at the time specified. Poetry is designed, I take it, as a counterweight to such depersonalised, bureaucratic language, in which not only meaning but action appear to be already caught in an infinitude of deferrals. This, again, is not to suggest that such ‘Visions’ and ‘Objectives’ are not necessary, and one hopes successful; only to propose that something vital to human phenomenological experience of place, including experiences and expressions one might term ecocentric rather than anthropocentric, is missing. We exclude this dimension, I think, at our peril. This is also not to pretend that poetry hasn’t analogous limitations, or that in itself it offers some kind of solution to ‘saving the earth’, to echo John Felstiner’s titular phrase. In his introduction to *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*, Felstiner validly asks:

Realistically, what can poetry say, much less do, about global

² I am grateful to Tarryn Riddin of NMMU for making these available to me.

warming, seas rising, species endangered, water and air polluted, wilderness road-ridden, rain-forests razed, along with strip-mining and mountaintop removal, clearcutting, overfishing, overeating, overconsumption, overdevelopment, overpopulation, and so on and on? Well, next to nothing (2009:7).

Yet poets do insist on saying things, and as we shall see, Brian Walter touches on almost every one of these listed ills in his Swartkops estuary sequence of poems. Walter would surely agree with Felstiner's comment that it is 'a question of human consciousness' (2009: 13), of individuals' cumulative choices. Poetry raises the questions pertaining to, and calls for the redirection of, those choices.

Science, policy and activism point the way towards solutions, but something deeper must draw us there. It can be found in poetry's musical lift, attentive imagery, and shaping force, which stem from prehistory and live in today's magazines, slim volumes, readings, slams, songs, Web sites, blogs. In country or city, poems make a difference by priming consciousness (Felstiner 2009: 13 - 14).

Attentiveness to detail, in a manner analogous to science but with a bias towards the phenomenological and emotive experience of encountering that detail, is poetry's necessary purview. As Jonathan Bate, rephrasing Gaston Bachelard, puts it: 'the more attuned I am as I miniaturize the world, the better I dwell upon the earth' (Bate 2000:161). So much depends, in the end, on love, on its absences, and on the world's multiple impediments to it.

Estuaries are amongst our most treasured and threatened coastal spaces. Allanson and Baird note that 'during the 1980s and 1990s the demands being made on the estuarine environment, both directly and indirectly, by anthropogenic activities were considerable' – indeed, 'in danger of modifying river and tidal flow to such an extent that the estuarine habitat along the coast could disappear' (Allanson & Baird 1999:1). This is certainly only to be exacerbated by rising sea levels resulting from global warming. Tidal, ecologically unique, and preternaturally vulnerable to human interference, then, estuaries may be seen as particularly rich 'bioregions' where notions of belonging, ecological fragility, and existential liminality

may be explored³.

Port Elizabeth's Swartkops estuary is 'one of the most threatened freshwater systems in South Africa' (Enviro-Fish 2010:xv), sandwiched as it is between the suburbs of Bluewater Bay and the townships of New Brighton, the bridge of the N2, the factories of North End and, well up the river, the industrial towns of Uitenhage and Despatch. Whales breed in the waters just offshore; fishermen haunt the row of massive dolosse⁴ along the shoreline; luxury homes along the eastern rim are vulnerable to floods; flamingos sift the saltflats on the islands and curves; impoverished nomads stalk the siltbeds for pencil-bait while better-endowed birders scan for gulls and terns and sanderlings. Of South Africa's 255-odd estuaries (only 37 are deemed 'true' estuaries, permanently open to the sea), the Swartkops is ranked eleventh for its biological richness (Rump 2009:1). It contains the country's third-largest salt marsh, home to innumerable invertebrates as well as migrant birds which boost the wader population annually from 1800 to 4000. The 500-hectare area also includes the Valley Thicket-protecting Swartkops Nature Reserve, and the unofficial Aloe Reserve between Bluewater Bay and Amsterdamhoek. These are imperfectly policed spots of quasi-wilderness in a bioregion inescapably interlaced with human activity, from power generation to recreational fishing. A study published in 2000 noted a marked, potentially dangerous 20-year increase in the presence of heavy metals such as chrome, lead, zinc and titanium in Swartkops sediments (Binning & Baird

³ This is a somewhat contested term, as explored most recently in the collection *The Bioregional Imagination* (eds Glotfelty, Lynch and Armbruster 2011). In an essay therein on Douglas Livingstone's *A Littoral Zone*, I suggest that the fluidity of shoreline conditions makes the concept particularly difficult to sustain. Walter's poems' treatment of the shifting parameters of an estuary further exemplify this. As the C.A.P.E. management plans state, estuaries are 'not isolated systems', but rather represent an 'interface' of many systems (Enviro-Fish 2010: xvii), or what is sometimes termed an 'ecotone'. Nevertheless, the notion of the 'bioregion' remains useful in its insistence that places are defined in the first instance ecocentrically, that is by their unique and natural features (rather than, say political boundaries), which may or may not be regarded as including human involvements.

⁴ Large angular concrete shapes haphazardly piled up as a breakwater.

2003). Another, by Lamberth and Turpie, estimated some 35 tons of fish catch from the estuary, almost all by angling, a catch now under serious strain as smaller and smaller fish are being taken out (2003: 33). I quote here part of Lamberth and Turpie's general conclusion, not to disagree with their views, but rather to note the nature of their language and conceptualisations:

In general, the protection of estuarine fish resources will also depend on the sound management of activities which affect estuarine environments. Apart from the direct effect on fish stocks, recreational angling involves boat traffic and bait digging, leading to disturbance, trampling and depletion of prey for fish. More importantly, perturbations that occur in the marine environment or catchment may negatively impact on fish populations in estuaries. In particular, if freshwater requirements of estuaries are not adequately met, the resultant chemical and biophysical changes in the estuarine headwaters and in mouth condition can severely hamper fish recruitment For these reasons it is strongly advocated that a philosophy of ecosystem preservation be used in management policy in addition to individual species conservation efforts. Such policies will lead to more rational decisions ... (Lamberth & Turpie 2003:28).

Note, again, the language of conceptual generality; of traceable cause-and-effect, often involving largely invisible dimensions, such as the chemical; of the assumption of anthropocentric management policy as the primary motivator, actor, and beneficiary; the pervasive use of the passive voice ('are not met'; 'it is advocated'; 'be used'); and the culmination in the appeal to the rational as the ultimate arbiter of decision-making. To reiterate, I do not demur from such advocacy. I want only to point out its limits by asking these questions: What then of the individual fisherwoman, birder, boat-owner? Whose sense of belonging and responsibility (or responsiveness) here might underpin (or hinder) 'sound management'? What is the role of sensual, unique engagements with individual animals or specific places within the bioregion? Who is likely to love the place and its denizens sufficiently to motivate the enormous effort required in saving it, and why? Is the 'rational' the sole dimension of human experience? As the foregoing intimates, poetry suggests it is not. It is one under-estimated locus of exploring the non-

rational, phenomenological, corporeal and humane experience of ecological belonging which can mediate, as Felstiner puts it, between the egocentric and the ecocentric, or between the self-obsessed and the impossibly idyllic.

If I may indulge in a personal example of what I mean: a friend of mine lived in one of Amsterdamhoek's riverside homes; when his family sold, he paid a final visit to the estuarine environment his father had taught him to love. We boated and walked, and found things we would rather have not. I wrote a poem about it, 'Leaving the Swartkops':

On the mudbanks the whimbrels denied
the rents in time opening up as the tide
dropped. The marshes hissed unplaceably.

On the salt-pans, we found flamingos –
their long toes blessed the settled blue,
their necks curled innocuous as cup-hooks –
and then, like a sprung trap, a woman's
arm, the humerus clean as a candle, the black
hand intact, relaxed as pianist's.

We at least could still be brisk, our palms
reassured elbows, we were yet complete,
could savour even mud, spongy with dead
storms, and lucid prawns, and pencilbait,
and entrust ourselves to the boneless sea (Wylie 1996:33).

Brian Walter, erstwhile Hogsback resident and one of a group of poets from there who call themselves and regularly publish as the *Ecce Poets*⁵, now lives

⁵ The *Ecce* poets comprise Cathal Lagan, Norman Morrissey, Quentin Hogge, Laura Kirsten, Mariss Everitt, and Brian Walter. All have published volumes individually, but also in regular collaborations, amongst the most recent being *Spaces* (2009) and *Brood* (2010). Walter has also published the personal volumes *Mousebirds* (2008) and *Baakens* (2000). The group is a long-standing phenomenon of poetic commitment suffering equally long-standing critical neglect.

in Port Elizabeth. Like my other friend, he too was shown the treasures and pains of the Swartkops by his father, and has written regularly about this diminutive bioregion of growth and memory. In his collection, *Mousebirds*, Walter writes in several poems about the multi-layered condition of being at the shoreline. The 'placid estuaries of Swartkops' ('Poachers'; in 2008: 47) provide him with complex metaphors of being human, burdened and blessed with language and poetry. For instance, he writes of the neighbouring estuary of Ngqura (Coega) in expressly environmental terms: the poem carries the epigraph 'On being asked to join environmental action to protest industrial invasion of the old Coega wetland'. This is an event, Walter remarks with a pragmatic weariness, 'it's easier sometimes not to think'; but as poet he energises himself to list the complex richness of the interleaved human and natural history of the place, its

flamingoes, aloes, the metallic metaphor
of the flying blacksmith plover's tink, tink;
her pelargonium: new aluminium smelter.
There's poverty, employment, flamingoes,
development, holiness, dying species,
old African languages, and the old people,
their sacred landscape ... (50 - 51).

This is not merely list: the lines' careful juxtaposition of human and natural, of negative and positive presences, new against old, enact the difficult entanglements of estuarine activity. So, too, does the solitary metaphor, the 'industrial' characterisation of the birdcall as 'metallic'. The presence of metaphor as means of engagement with the world, as a reminder of awkward human-ness itself, is seldom far from the surface of Walter's ruminations: the poet is a kind of poacher, extracting his 'verbal abalone' (47) from the muddied tides of the world, a gleaner of meanings akin to the Lena figure of Athol Fugard's 1996 play *Boesman and Lena*, who reappears ghost-like in a number of poems. On the one hand metaphor is as vital as life, as in the poem 'Metaphor', from the 2010 *Ecca Poets* collection *Brood*:

Where the water spouts, I've formalized
a pond, lily pad and lotus flower,

that overflows into reed-beds,
in miniature: flowing north
from here, to the great green of the bay,
my bonsai Egypt, upper and lower,
the black and the red lands,
and when the sun comes, hieroglyphic
in a moment's meaning, my bone dry soul (Ecca 2010:8).

On the other hand, while the gardener-poet's creation of a bonsai encapsulation of the Nile delta, and perhaps of all estuaries, is an enactment of the operation of metaphor, there is a part of Walter's consciousness which recognises the reality that lies outside language. I will return briefly to this persistent epistemological problem towards the end. For now, I want to assert only that that reality, however perceived, its givenness as a conjunction of identity and place – shifting, moody, at some level *unplaceable* – is the central theme of Walter's primary estuarine sequence from the 1999 collection *Tracks*, the nine-poem cycle entitled 'Swartkops'.

The poems are dense and complex and beautiful, and I will try to tease out some primary themes; but to begin with, a brief summary of them. The first two – 'Looking back on a walk with my father' and 'Daughter of memory' – deal explicitly with memory, both concerned less with the father-figure than with that of a Lena-like poor woman, who becomes something of a tattered but eloquent, temporary and elusive 'muse' (5) for the poet as she searches for shellfish on the mudflats. These two interlocking ideas – childhood memory and the presence of intriguing poor folk – recur throughout the sequence. The third poem, 'Fishing', reinforces the sense of a cultural gap between the white boy-speaker and thin Xhosa children encountered during a fishing venture, in which attempts at communication fail, a 'nothingness of bait not taken' (7). Like several of the poems, such encounters are resonant of and with the national situation, to which Walter is keenly attuned. The fourth poem, 'Islands', examines with intimate and fond detail signs of the tiny denizens, plant and animal, of the reedbeds – and the discovery of signs of impoverished, marginal human habitation, too, leaving the speaker's mind faintly disturbed, 'jumbled as a pocket' (8). The tension here between notions of nature as pure or pristine, that impossibility, and human presences, is strong in a great deal of Walter's poetry generally. Poem

five, 'Grunters', returns to fishing, to the (one assumes) mentoring father-figure, and the theme of irretrievable pasts; fishing-lines become story-lines 'cast' out on the world's waters, 'languid' and tenuous, but life-affirming. The titles of the next two poems, 'Persephone' and 'Harpies', refer obviously to a literary and mythic dimension to some of Walter's verse. In the first, 'Persephone' is really his mother, plunging into the black depths of a sinkhole into which the boy-speaker's brother has vanished – not fatally, it seems – a momentary visit to the underworld, as it were. 'Harpies', on the other hand, is airborne, in which the seagulls 'scream' (11) the awareness of death and divisive histories, of the murder of Matthew Goniwe and the stark geographical divisions of apartheid which etch this landscape, but they are also custodians 'helping us preserve old faults' (12). The estuarine environment, here, is not only a 'netherworld' scarred with its layered pasts, but also a realm of renewal and 'possibilities' (11). 'Crustacean', like 'Grunters', is addressed to the father-figure, and relates the boy-poet's discomfiting experience of boiling alive and eating a crab, the discomfiture symbolic of 'that vain/ quest for humanity that defeated us all', and the crab itself becomes a signifier of the 'sideways' operations of self-deluding memory and the 'trap' of conscience. Subtly, broader politics haunt the backdrop of this poem, too. The final, key, and longest poem in the series, 'Tracks' (also the title poem of the whole collection), complexly overlays childhood memories with present geographies, which are geographies of emotion as well as of landscape, natural ecology and settlement. As with the other poems noted earlier, 'Tracks' reverts to Walter's characteristic musing upon the nature and inevitable presence of metaphor, the 'frail threads' of our reaching for adequacy of expression (15).

To draw out some prominent themes, then, and exemplify also the distinctive quality of the poetry itself, first, I want to notice the sense of geography and ecology. There is a precise, prismatic manner in which human activities are displayed as reliant upon, and imbricated with the textures of the place and its non-human denizens. The poems are pervasively fraught with the sense that the poet, remembering his visits as a boy, is primarily just that: a visitor. He is, or has become, knowledgeable and intimate with environmental details, but retains a sense of being the interloper, the plunderer, the voyeuristic birder with his binoculars. It is the poor folk, the bird-like, Lena figure, gleaning her very living from the mudflats, who truly

belong⁶. Belonging, in this case, creates muse-hood: the poet seems to gain poetic power from both the non-human and human icons of belonging in this shifting landscape. On the broadest scale, the poems collectively map the area: the seafront to the south, St Croix island offshore, the old and the new bridges, the railway tracks to the west, the old factories and sewage works, the townships of New Brighton, the ravaged hill of Coega Kop and the Zwartkoppes hills inland. Within this cartography, the precise details of interlocking lives emerge, between the tides, on the variable flats alongside and in the estuary: Walter mentions shellfish and waders, gulls and sedges, crabs and prawns, barbel and grunTERS, the smells of salt and the darkness of waters, shrubs and the paths of rodents, ‘the hidden little islanders’ (8)⁷. Throughout, however, these sundry non-human lives are seen as irremediably intertwined with and infiltrated by human lives, some of which are seen as scarcely less ‘natural’ or out-of-place, but others invasive. The final lines of ‘Tracks’ best exemplify this sense, a characteristic listing of iconic items of human imposition:

... fishing rod, knitting
needle, New Brighton, mother-
tongue, shanty-town and power (15).

Walter’s tone here is, however, not simplistically condemnatory of such productions: it reveals rather a sadness that they should be necessary at all. Again, what appears as a simple listing conforms to what Phillips has observed of recent ecology, not so much a utopian vision of wholeness, let alone moralistic ‘holism’, as a patchwork of cross-influences whose parameters are as much selected and metaphoric as ‘scientific’. The ‘list’ thus holds within it the as it were tidal tensions of the place – the visually

⁶ This is reminiscent also, perhaps, of the beach girl in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Douglas Livingstone’s poem ‘Haunted Estuary’ (1991:11), also features a mysterious woman; perhaps there is a feminisation of the tidal zone that deserves further exploration.

⁷ Rodents are notably absent from Rump’s admittedly limited *Swartkops Field Guide* and from the C.A.P.E. management plans: poets can add to scientific enumeration and observation, too.

echoing but socially contrastive images of fishing-rod and knitting needle, for instance, and the subtle ambivalences of the word 'power' which echo throughout the sequence. Industrial power is carried via pipelines, railways, and electricity stations into social geography, and classic apartheid class and race divisions, productions of political power, are still visible and extant: 'The band [of South End] is white city,/ that is black; between, the brown' (11). Despite a tentative sense of integration, there is a discernible tension between the empowered and disempowered, and a socially and politically sensitive empathy with the latter. Empowerment (in more than one meaning) has meant the industrialised destruction of much of the estuarine ecosystem, and Walter is not blind to this (the evident depletion of fish stocks, for instance), even as he appears somewhat sceptical of mainstream conservation philosophies. In sum, then, no environment seems more suited to expressions of ambivalence about belonging than a tidal estuary.

A further dimension to Walter's treatment of the Swartkops estuary is how he mythologises it in more widely literary terms, which extend meaning beyond its immediate ecological and political context. The region is 'iBhayi's nether world' (4), a 'dead land' (5), a 'wetland underworld' (11) and 'mudflat netherworld/ where all dead and living flit/ together' (11), an 'underworld of darkness' in which, along with his drowning brother, the poet treads 'the fruitless waters of hell' (10). For all its persistent memories of fatherly guidance, family picnics, and boyish adventure, then, the estuary has for the mature poet become also a locus of death. There are not only the 'little skulls of mouse and shrew', the 'tiny island mementoes of death' (8); there is also the haunting knowledge of the place where 'those men/ killed Goniwe and his friends,/ stifled away their pulse of soul,/ burnt every clue of personality' (11). Importantly, it seems also to be – or threatens to be – the place of the death of communication. He cannot talk to the ribald Xhosa boys in 'Fishing'; refusing her fish, he can only watch the Lena-muse figure walk away from him. Generally, he has 'seen little poetry in this world' (6). In 'Grunters', the speaker does not reply to the father.

Yet, out of this geography of mingled pain and companionship, fecundity and silence, arises a communicability of the poems themselves, removed though they may now be from the ecology that prompted them. The Lena-like 'bait-woman' may never read these poems herself, but she has brought them into being, and has prompted at least the desire to somehow

locate the ‘old salted heart of all humankind’ (6). To focus briefly on this crucial figure in the sequence: like the gulls in ‘Harpies’, she serves to take the poet out of himself, to see himself momentarily from another perspective, as the alien and alienated birdwatcher confronted afresh with his humanity.

There is that in me that went with her,
and looked back to see a birdwatcher stand
like a fool, binoculars in hand. These salt
flats can fix those frail shapes of humanity
we hold most dear: the salt-flesh of heart,
an underfoot of mud, breath-lapped waters
that in their tides wash everything apart.

Out of this flux between fixity and tides, the poet fishes an awkward inspiration:

Of course, there’s always some catch. I found
no living verse on this pilgrimage. But her old
memory shone like a barbel, river-dark

This is not so much a dehumanisation of the woman as a recognition of her unreachability, her strange beauty in an environment now dominated by men mining ‘their barren salt works’ (5). If there remains here a ‘muddy whiff’ of Wordsworthian romanticisation of the peasant-in-the-landscape, it is fractured both by the political awareness underlying the sequence and the retreat of the woman into a grimly renewed strangeness. If in this poem she walks away from the poet into the ‘dead land’, like Charon ‘ferrying’ part of his being across the memory-erasing tidal river, she can return in memory in the next poem, ‘Daughter of Memory’ (an allusion no doubt to Mnemosyne). Here, ‘at last’, the poet deliberately tries to find those memories, like the mudprawns ‘caught/ in the tin the bait-woman brought’ (5). Though he is all but overwhelmed by ‘pointlessness’, the next two stanzas beautifully express both the difficulty and the treasure of excising meaning, poetry, from the flux of the world, the fragility of its imaginative fruit:

Still, I am out of my depth, trapped
in an image, where all must sway
with the wading stride of that woman.
Yet, there was a muddy whiff of grace,
for her poor beauty carried me away
from myself, to strive always to find
the old salted heart of all humankind.

But I've seen little poetry in this world.
We creep in a circle, swayed by wants
beyond our own. If I could only sketch,
in true fond fullness, our empty lives,
or feel the heart that moved her leg,
or watch her leg shape into shank,

then verse may well come home to me,
treading the mud into shapes of memory (6).

If there is one single most important theme to Walter's Swartkops sequence, it is this same, enduringly ambivalent trickiness of shaping in a world which largely shapes us. Shaping, indeed, is a key word in much of Walter's poetry. Even – perhaps particularly – memory serves us ill:

my memory crawls like a cancer,

a dark revenger, for screams recall
the death that lies on our past, that vain

quest for humanity that defeated us all,
that sideslip from our true selves,

that dance to find a life (13).

Just what our 'true selves' *are* remains an unresolved question, of course, and not just unresolved by Brian Walter. Part of the problem, as I mentioned early in this essay, are the ambivalently inadequate resources of language

itself. In another poem, its setting about as far from the Swartkops as one can imagine – London’s Piccadilly station – congruent thoughts and images nevertheless emerge:

We place words into dark water,
let them sink: words, which were
in the beginning, on wide-spread
wings, are lost in the turning tides:
media, images, travel-technology ...

....

and now we place words together
artfully, and yet they sink away.
Something in the tongue is wrong ...
(‘Underground’; in *Ecce* 2008: 10).

Though the ‘artful’ resources of poetic metaphor might be the perceived solution to the flattening rhetorics of media and technology, Walter remains humble, if not pessimistic, about his task. At a nagging and deep level, the poet suspects and respects the primacy of total silence. This he tries to capture in ‘Intrusion’, in which, observing schoolchildren trying to create their own poems, he finds himself in a mesh of ambivalent relationship with their presumed inner worlds:

I steal their silence: try to enter it.
But my thoughts run wild about the township,
out over the flamingo pans, flood flats
of the Swartkops River, where ironic water

shapes back the shacks of corrugated sheets.
I write on their silence, harness the zeal
of their dreams, till their own quiet becomes
both medium and means: I must keep words out (2007: 9).

Walter’s inability to ‘enter’ fully the township kids’ specific linguistic worlds prompts an inadvertent foray into the estuarine environment of his own childhood, a place as fluid as his own unconscious and that has come to

signify that inescapable component of his identity. Ironically, it is in the shared quiet of the creative moment that he shares most with the children: to communicate fully, paradoxically, is to remain wordless.

Nevertheless, in the tidal oscillation between creation and pointlessness, between voice and silence, metaphor itself emerges, the linguistic moderator between them. Walter might well agree with Stephen Jay Gould, that 'The world is never simple; it doesn't even provide apt metaphors' (quoted by Phillips 2003:52), to the extent that it is we who make metaphors, not 'the world'. But he would perhaps not deny the proclamation that metaphor apparently makes, namely that world and language are nevertheless co-dependent in some ways. Is it really coincidental that not too far down the coast, at Blombos Cave, was discovered mankind's earliest artistic artefact, an ochre fragment cross-hatched with lines not unlike the crossings of white wave-edges on the nearby beach? Or that even as I was revising this essay, news came that from that same cave has been unearthed evidence of the mixing of paints, pushing human artistry back even further, to 100 000 years ago. Would it be too much to suggest that where the patternings and inter-penetrations of the world are most vivid – the tidal world of the coast – art first mimicked its surroundings by reproducing those patterns – that metaphor itself is, as it were, estuarine? In this sequence as a whole, then, Walter – keenly attuned to the possibilities of environment and its imaginative potentials, but also to the limitations on such imagining – strives to believe, against all the signs in the world, that 'perhaps not all life/ waits to serve some selfish turn' and that 'picking through this mud, [we] will more easily find a kinder way' (12).

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