

**Hawke Research Institute
Working Paper Series**

No 29

**ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN AUSTRALIAN
LITERATURE: OUTSIDE THE LIMITS OF
ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS**

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2005

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ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE: OUTSIDE THE LIMITS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Emily Potter*

What does recent Australian literature have to say about our ecological situation and the environment of ‘crisis’ or ‘risk’ in which we are currently immured? If we *are* ‘living within the shadow of our own annihilation’¹ at the beginning of the twenty-first century, how is Australian literature responding? Amongst some critics of late, literary fiction has been pointedly accused of lacking in engaged and insightful ecological discourse, trailing ‘way behind’ other fields in the eco-humanities, such as history and politics, in ‘all respects’ of activism and insight.² Indeed, more generally, Australian fiction has been criticised by cultural commentators, most prominently the writer Drusilla Modjeska, for failing to attend to the ‘conditions on the ground’³ in Australia, to ‘the stuff of lives lived in this particular experience of global modernity’.⁴ In the face of pressing environmental concerns, let alone a host of social and political imperatives, Australian fiction, we are being told, has lost its sense of ethical urgency.

This paper takes issue with these criticisms and argues for a reappraisal of what is considered to be an ecological consciousness in literature. Drawing upon a recent example of Australian fiction that does not overtly lend itself to environmental politics, I suggest that, in paying attention to literary poetics, ecological commentary can emerge and take effect. How we represent the world informs how we live in it – either responsive or not to our ecological place. This is where Australian literature operates as both referent to and participant in our environmental conditions. Far from irrelevant to the anxieties of a planet in crisis, literary poetics can claim an engagement, not only with this theme, but also its material unfolding. What this challenges is the limitation of ecological discourse to what is commonly associated – aesthetically and materially - with ‘green’ perspectives (for example, trees, ‘wilderness’, clean air, clean water, etc) and their explicit or metonymic articulation in story.

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1 Nick Stevenson, *Cultural citizenship: cosmopolitan questions*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, 2003, p 79.

2 Dan Wylie, ‘Elephants and the ethics of ecological criticism’ in Sue Kossew and Dianne Schwerdt (eds), *Re-imagining Africa: new critical perspectives*, Nova Science, Huntington, NY, 2001, pp 175–93.

3 Drusilla Modjeska, *Timepieces*, Picador, Sydney, 2002, p 205.

4 *Ibid*, p 209.

Literature and the environment as a socio-political issue are of course familiar bedfellows in western literature, and their relationship in the latter part of the twentieth century appeared promising to literary critics, in a context of increasing public discourse on ecological shifts and ‘environmental horrors’.⁵ Cynthia Deitering, for example, traces what she terms a ‘toxic consciousness’ in American literature of the 1980s – a decade of high-profile nuclear accidents and environmental contaminations.⁶ In the novels that she discusses (by, amongst others, Don DeLillo, Paul Theroux and Saul Bellow) Deitering identifies an environmental politics that posits the negative ontological as well as ecological consequences of a society that ‘has fouled its own nest’.⁷ These are fictions that highlight the material realities of post-industrial modernity – the wasting of landscapes, the sludge in our rivers, the ‘middle-class domestic glut [that is] the underside of consumer capitalism’⁸ – as crises in both nature and culture. For Deitering, the import of these novels lies in their ability to ‘mirror’ a world gone awry, reflecting back our own devastating effects on the world as a way of appealing to affective recognition. She links affect directly to positive action as she insists that these representations of what has been lost ‘do much to raise the environmental consciousness of the society that sees itself in the mirror’.⁹

Deitering’s article offers a characteristic approach to what is generally termed ‘environmental fiction’, identified by its overt thematic and dystopic poetics which function to contrast the present with the past. Back in Australia, Michael Pollak and Margaret MacNabb’s *Hearts and minds: creative Australians and the environment* takes a similar stance on the characteristics of affective ecological writing to offer an affirmative assessment of Australian fiction’s environmental record from the 1970s to the mid 1990s. In their examination of writers including Dorothy Hewett, Gabrielle Lord and Patrick White, Pollak and MacNabb argue for the self-reflexive power of literary representation, whereby emotive responses to environmental conditions are attributed a deterministic ethical power: if we feel, we will act in a productive way. Thus they contend, ‘if a[n] environmental horror is described in a novel, complete with the human element and the emotional consequences, a reader is touched – and takes to heart what is at stake’.¹⁰

5 Michael Pollak and Margaret MacNabb, *Hearts and minds: creative Australians and the environment*, Hale and Iremonger, Alexandria, NSW, 2000.

6 Cynthia Deitering, ‘The postnatural novel: toxic consciousness in fiction of the 1980s’ in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (eds), *The ecocriticism reader: landmarks in literary ecology*, University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 1996, pp 196–203.

7 Ibid, p 202.

8 Ibid, p 197.

9 Ibid, p 202.

10 Pollak and MacNabb, *Hearts and minds*, p 107.

Here, a ‘taking to heart’ is a motivation to self-correction and change, inspired by an environmental imaginary such as Deitering points to, in which the environment ‘answers back’ to the culture of its degradation – protesting, for example, in ‘the muck, slime, filth and degradation at the heart of a big city’.¹¹ This dialogic relation between culture and environment again asserts direct lines between cause and effect as well as harm and salve. In a world of ecological damage and mess the imperative for human response is restitution and recovery, Pollak and MacNabb suggest. It is no surprise then that the novels they canvas as environmentally significant are seen to champion this position. Evidencing this, for example, they cite novelist Lord: ‘people have always been expecting the end of the world. But now, we’re abusing it like never before ... this time our apocalyptic visions might actually come true’.¹²

Yet paradoxically, in their bid to call attention to the environment as a significant site of discourse, these perspectives delimit the possibilities of literature as an ethical force and consequently close off, rather than foster, debate into human ecological relations. Pollak and MacNabb’s (as well as Deitering’s) intention to approach post-industrial culture via a paradigm of loss and redemption reduces the ecological effects of techno-modernity to a portentous state on a global stage. They intuit environmental poetics metonymically, as objectively reflecting back our awful and ugly truths. This approach is not only anthropocentric, wherein an environment will only ever ‘speak’ in terms of human success or failure, but also relies upon the linear logic of modernity – the world rendered into quantifiable and thus containable parts – that Pollak and MacNabb purport to critique.

There are troubling resonances here with the colonial tactic of ‘silencing’ an environment so as to foster an illusion of human ecological centrality and control. As Paul Carter identifies in *The lie of the land*, by imaging the environment in rectilinear terms the coloniser could repress its unfamiliarity, ‘ungrounding’ environmental presences and effects – that is, isolating and extracting a particular ecological constituent from a complex web of relations – so as to make them signify, like a theatrical prop, human drama alone.¹³ While it may be impossible for us to conceive of our environment without reference to the human subject, indeed it is surely vital for environmental ethics that this is so, this does not mean that we can know or determine these relations and their significance in any complete way.

The poetics employed by Pollak and MacNabb assume a world composed of just these kind of knowable relations that link, chain-like, into an overall and ‘fitting’ environmental picture. In this way of seeing, a particular effect or presence in an ecology, such as waste, can thus be dispossessed of any place or meaning to an

11 Ibid.

12 Quoted in Pollak and MacNabb, *ibid*, p 15.

13 Paul Carter, *The lie of the land*, Faber and Faber, London, 1996, pp 3–12.

environment except as a referent of human value in a cosmology defined by atomism and order. Contingency and risk are positioned in opposition to wellbeing. The effect of this metonymic logic, however, as John Biln writes, is to ‘flatten ... the heterogenous life-world to a comfortable understanding’.¹⁴ As metonymy seeks to resolve gaps in knowledge and claim ontological assurance for the self-in-the-world – essentially taking command of an environmental vista – it suppresses difference and rejects the partial which only distances representation from the real. What ecological poetics in metonymy actually encourage is a retreat into the ‘illusion of a green oasis’,¹⁵ and a simultaneous disengagement from a transforming world.

While this representation of ecology may offer comfort in its assertion of a ‘right’ ecological order, it remains out of touch with the marked paradigmatic shift that has taken place in scientific understandings of the material world over the last thirty or so years.¹⁶ In this ‘new ecology’,¹⁷ concepts of chaos, process and interrelation replace atomism and linearity. Matter is recognised as having the ability to “express” itself in complex and creative ways,¹⁸ within systems comprised of surprising and endlessly reforming flows of molecular events.¹⁹ What this means for the discourse of environmentalism is a necessary rethinking of what has previously seemed anathema to ecological health. Science is showing us that disturbance in ecosystems is a constitutive and generative force, rather than devastating ‘pristine’ environments. For a literature that can attend to our ecological conditions, and engage with what it means to be a subject in the world, we need textual poetics that explore and extrapolate risk and mess in this way, beyond a dichotomy of damage and unity.

Yet a reluctance in popular understandings of environment and subjectivity to countenance unsettlement and uncertainty means that those fictions already employing these motifs poetically will be missed or discounted from ecological significance. Literature that works with a *metaphoric* poetics offers the active engagement with the world that metonymy lacks, and it is here that the ethical possibility for fiction lies. As Lawrence Buell describes, metaphor is a mode of

14 John Biln, ‘(De)forming self and other: towards an ethics of difference’ in GB Nalbantoglu and CT Wong (eds), *Postcolonial space(s)*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1997, p 30.

15 Lawrence Buell, ‘Toxic discourse’, *Critical Inquiry*, no 24, 1998, p 648.

16 Manuel DeLanda, ‘Nonorganic life’ in Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (eds), *Incorporations: zone 6, Zone*, New York, 1992, p 129.

17 Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Connecting with ecological futures’, position paper for the National Humanities and Social Sciences Summit, Canberra, 26–27 July 2001, p 3.

18 Ibid, p 133.

19 Jane Bennett, ‘The force of things: steps towards an ecology of matter’, *Political Theory*, vol 32, no 3, 2004, p 354.

‘partial realisation’²⁰; that is, it signifies incomplete knowledge rather than a totalising claim on the real. Metaphor refuses a final and stable meaning and is poetically ‘rough’, admitting slippages and uncertainties into any attempt to represent the world. Proximity to, and distance from, an independently existing real is at the heart of these poetics, as metaphor enacts the relational model that it simultaneously describes, coming into contact with, but never able to contain, the real. Thus, while everything is in potential touch ecologically, touch cannot turn into total control and metaphor suggests this poetically, accordant with an eco-humanities understanding ‘that ultimately’ – and like the non-human world – ‘we too are flows of matter and energy’.²¹

Where metonymy champions an anthropocentric view of the world, I argue, metaphor approaches the world anthropomorphically, with *morphosis* signalling a key characteristic of ecology. Suggesting transformation and process without beginning, middle or end, anthropomorphosis evokes proximity and distance in a mutable environment between the self and what it attempts to know and represent. As a poetic practice, it admits necessary gaps into an ecological picture from where new relations, possibilities and meanings can emerge. Metaphor, in opposition to the theatricalising of an environmental vista, will only ever offer a ‘provisional conception of environment’²² and consequently the ways of living appropriate to it. Similarly, affect, and its role in ecological ethics, becomes a shifting dynamic in these poetics, rather than a predetermined line between cause and effect. Released from hierarchy and linearity, affect takes on an unpredictable quality that is more suited to a living ecology.

Janette Turner Hospital’s *Due preparations for the plague* is a recent Australian fiction that employs this provisional quality in its poetics to depict similarly provisional material worlds. A story of a hijacked aircraft and the horror of biological weapons, on the one hand, Turner Hospital’s book situates the sparks of energy and affect amongst the risks, and sometimes devastations, of a world in process. Significantly, the novel works *with* mess rather than against it, as a metaphor for the cultural and environmental complexity that both material mutability and conceptual disorder indicate. This is where I argue we can locate the ecological significance of literary representation, and consequently the ground for ethical response and what cultural theorist Jane Bennett terms the ‘enchanted materialism’ that such poetics can inspire. For Bennett, enchantment, or affective engagement, is ‘an essential component of an ethical, ecologically aware life’.²³

20 Buell, ‘Toxic discourse’, p 664.

21 Manuel DeLanda quoted in Nigel Clark, ‘Nanoplanet: molecular engineering in the time of ecological crisis’, *Time and Society*, vol 7, no 2, 1998, p 366.

22 Paul Carter, *Lost subjects*, Historic Houses Trust of SA, Lyndhurst, NSW, 1999, p 33.

23 Jane Bennett, *The enchantment of modern life*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001, p 99.

To acknowledge this, however, requires that we get beyond the tendency in environmental discourse to reduce ecology to a paradigm of familiar ‘green’ icons and images. Indicative of this tendency, for example, is eco-critic Cheryll Glotfelty who, in an essay that examines the lack of ecological consciousness in contemporary writing, demands rather scornfully ‘where *is* the natural world in this text?’²⁴ And yet how can the ‘natural world’ not have a textual presence if a story is in any way concerned with how we live and what we do, and the milieu in which this occurs? ‘Nature’ does not exclude human life, its creations and effects, but, as Freya Matthews has written, ‘denotes the domain of physics – either the physical universe in its entirety or the laws that undergird it’.²⁵ Matter and energy are the always unfixed, always propulsive, constitutive components of the world. In this way of seeing, crisis is never an end point, but is always a site of new things in the making.

In the representation of molecular vitality that *Due preparations for the plague* employs, to draw upon the book briefly, humans do not monopolise agency, but are entangled in a material cosmos in which they come into constant but unpredictable contact with a flow of ecological elements and forces. The metaphor of plague thus works on one level to suggest this quality of ecology in which to be in the world means to be always open to infection, materially and affectively. While infection can mean suffering and death – and the hijacking victims do not survive in the book – it is also the condition of ecology: the state, as Bennett writes, of (“us” being) mixed up with “it”.²⁶ This is how Lyotard describes the workings of affect in a textual sense. ‘What is important in a text’, he explains, ‘is not what it means, but what it does and incites to do ... the charge of affect it contains and transmits ... the metamorphoses of this potential energy into other things’.²⁷ The synergies here with ecological process are telling. Dynamics characterise our experience of the world as much as our living presence within it.

Turner Hospital’s representation of the qualities of infection as an ecological disposition for transformation and complex relations provides a response of sorts to the novel’s central and unsettling questions: ‘how do we ready ourselves for what might happen tomorrow? What possible preparations can be made?’²⁸ In the book’s

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- 24 Cheryll Glotfelty, ‘Literary studies in an age of environmental crisis’ in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (eds), *The ecocriticism reader: landmarks in literary ecology*, University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 1996, p xxiii.
- 25 Freya Matthews, ‘Letting the world do the doing’, *Australian Humanities Review*, no 33, 2004.
- 26 Bennett, *The enchantment of modern life*, p 99.
- 27 Jean-François Lyotard, quoted in Stephen Muecke, ‘The fall: fictocritical writing’ in Brenda Walker (ed), *The writer’s reader*, Halstead Press, Sydney, 2002, p 127.
- 28 Janette Turner Hospital, *Due preparations for the plague*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2003, p 390.

final section, ten hostages from the plane, dressed in protective costume, are herded into a sarin-filled bunker and left there to die as the clothing degenerates. One by one they remove their oxygen masks and speak soliloquies into the eye of a camera in the corner of the bunker, as parting 'gifts' to the world. Victoria Goldberg is the sixth hostage to do so. Turner Hospital narrates: '[she] begins to sing and brightness falls from the air. You listen. You are transformed. The air in the bunker turns green and gold. You step into the cramped space of the dream and you offer Victoria Goldberg your hand and the wall opens and she takes you away'.²⁹ While these poetics deny the possibility of being certainly prepared, the world they convey is full of enchantment, in the porosity of living things and the interactivity of always-forming relations.

To think about Turner Hospital's question in terms of the fate of the earth may appeal to a cultural preoccupation with security and order. But, as the new ecological thinking I have described suggests, this fundament of much environmental discourse is at odds with the molecular flow of the world. It consigns humans to an omnipotent position, out of touch with natural systems except as harbingers of ultimate catastrophe. Even while traditional environmental discourse desires a harmonious relationship between the human and non-human existence, it undermines our ability to negotiate complexity and uncertainty, which are the preconditions for newness and life. And while we cannot ever fully prepare for what might come, we can foster social imaginaries that highlight flow and connectivity, and in which we can recognise ourselves as already caught up in the active life of the world. As Bennett suggests, an awareness of and openness to a vibrant ecology, full 'incredible and unpredictable morphings'³⁰ and encounters, is more likely to foster ethical ecological sensibilities and behaviours than a discourse of panic and fear.

Consequently, if ethics rely upon such openness to the unknown (as many thinkers believe) then a poetics that will encourage this must be premised on the inconclusive rather than the absolute. Affect will not direct action in these poetics, and no mirror can be positioned between the self and the world, but both representation and its affects will work with indeterminacy to propel new possibilities for ecological understanding and response. For a literature that attends to our ecological conditions, and engages with what it means to be a subject in the world, we need textual poetics that explore and extrapolate risk and mess in this way, beyond a dichotomy of damage and redemption. Rather than lagging behind other movements in ecological thought, then, some fictional narratives are already there, exploring such fertile modes of representation. To move beyond the familiar paradigms of 'environmental consciousness', and to approach our ecology from the position that all life is enmeshed in never-finalised relations, may be the impetus

29 Ibid, p 330.

30 Bennett, *The enchantment of modern life*, p 99.

8 EMILY POTTER

we need to act generously and with care in the presence of unending ecological change.

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