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Abstract

A few kilometres outside Kimberley in South Africa is a pan called Kamfers Dam which is home to the largest population of flamingoes in the country. When I first saw them, stopping the car on the side of the N7 highway to Johannesburg and getting out to look, the multitude of birds seemed like an affirmation of joy and wildness after the grey dust of the diamond city. Wading, chattering, flying, the pink flowering of a myriad flamingoes was something wonderful — a glimpse of liveliness and continuity before, or perhaps beyond, the troubled history of the mines and the world that they made possible.

JULIA MARTIN

A Poem about a Bird Can Be a Picture of the World: Reading ‘Heron’s Place’ by Jeremy Cronin

A landscape is the most solid appearance
in which a history can declare itself.

(F. Inglis 489)

A few kilometres outside Kimberley in South Africa is a pan called Kamfers Dam which is home to the largest population of flamingoes in the country. When I first saw them, stopping the car on the side of the N7 highway to Johannesburg and getting out to look, the multitude of birds seemed like an affirmation of joy and wildness after the grey dust of the diamond city. Wading, chattering, flying, the pink flowering of a myriad flamingoes was something wonderful — a glimpse of liveliness and continuity before, or perhaps beyond, the troubled history of the mines and the world that they made possible.

This response should not be surprising: the flamingoes were not only pink and beautiful, they were also birds; and in the world of poems and stories in which I was raised, birds tell of freedom and the beyond. The skylarks, thrushes and swallows of imagination are made for song and flight and the possibility of transcendence. So when the robin redbreast is put in a cage, and the nightingale will no longer sing for the king who has captured her, my sense of outrage is not only for the bird itself, or even for all creatures that human beings have subjugated. It is also a recognition of the measure of what we as human beings have lost. If wild birds evoke a realm uncolonised by the city, a nature which endures outside the walls of human culture; then birds in cages are a reminder of the coercive power of a certain kind of civilisation, and perhaps even of human confinement and loss of a freedom. This is why, I think, after a day of tramping around Kimberley, the sight of the flamingoes was such a balm to the senses. ‘Here we are’, they seemed to say, ‘here we are in abundance’, as though the ancient liveliness of things endured, in spite of the city, and generations of power and pain.

Or so it appeared. Investigating the flamingoes further on my return home, I learned that their lovely multiplicity exists not in defiance of the city but, ironically, because of it. In the past the wetland was more seasonal but now the pan is topped up daily with treated sewerage effluent and storm-water runoff. It is full all the time, quite smelly, and the birds seem to love it. Ornithologists are worried, though, that this curious situation is not sustainable. The flamingoes will

not breed at Kamfers Dam and there must surely come a time when the hundreds of tons of salts and phosphates and faecal bacteria that flow into the closed system of the pan each year make the water too polluted for the birds to endure it.

This information was disappointing and not what I had wanted to hear. Of course the tempting opposition that the lively pink birds had seemed to confirm — some persistent fantasy of a nature separable from culture — was just too simple to explain what was actually taking place. Instead, I had to recognise that the flamingoes (and presumably other birds too), inhabit a place which is inextricably interwoven with the lives of other beings, human ones included, and that history and human culture are ineradicable participants in the wetland where they live. On reflection, their presence came to seem not so much a manifestation of transcendence as of interbeing and interconnectedness: the colony of flamingoes on the water near the highway reflects the patterns of a myriad things. Each slender bird is made of pink and paler feathers, a sharp beak, long legs, delicate feet and the sounds of all the others, calling. Each one is fish and mud, wings and eggs, sewage and fertilizer, diamonds and effluent, mines and compounds, and the city's quest for lasting treasure.

In 'Heron's Place', a poem from Jeremy Cronin's recent collection, *More than a Casual Contact* (47–48), the attentive observation of a particular bird offers the speaker a similar, but differently situated, opportunity for reflection. The heron whose place is the subject of the poem is, like the flamingoes, a wild bird who feeds in the waters at the edges of human habitation. This liminal zone, the Tongati river estuary in Kwazulu Natal, is like Kamfers Dam, a place that embodies quite clearly the interpenetrations of human culture and natural environment. Though the heron in Cronin's poem catches fish as her kind have always done, the water is full of human things: sewage again, but also textile effluents from a nearby factory, pollutants from dumps and other sources, and the toxic by-products of the sugar industry in the form of fertilizers from the farms and chemicals from the mill. The poem does not consider these aspects of the physical pollution of the Tongati river, but it is directly concerned with the impact of industry in the region, and with what this reveals about human power and culture in a specific place. At the same time, the heron who continues to dwell and fish in this ambiguous territory becomes one instance of a kind of resistance that human beings may also practice. Vigilance, tenacity, specificity in the absorption she brings to her ancient task, the heron embodies a quality of attention, integrity and endurance amidst an environment infused with the globalised networks of business, money and power. Though she may not be free of its constraints, her awareness-in-place evokes the possibility of a resilient cultural practice that survives somehow, in spite of it all. Reading the poem I attempt to situate a response in terms of my own location, and wonder, towards the end of this essay, what its standpoint might imply for one particular cultural practice in which I am involved at this strange, moment in history — the teaching of English.

Here is the poem in full:

Heron's Place

Here the winter Tongati trickles from miles of cane field,
Through the indented smell of molasses,
Under the M4, to come to sea.

A sand-flat under an inch of water.
A place that might be lifted
On a fringe of an incoming wave-surge
That flips and spins up
Minnows the size of small coins.

Which is why she is here
All afternoon, holding fast to place,
Pinning down the specific,
Unregarding of the heavy-duty mill trucks
That grind the highway behind.

Further on, a curve of beach, here, there,
Solitary rods mark fishermen, hoping for shad.
Most of them the unemployed-retrenched
Some still wearing frayed mill overalls.
For them, this is not hobby
But the pursuit of proteins
For the squatter camp hidden
In a patch of vestigial forest behind
As they cast lines
Weighted with old spark plugs.

*'In the past, the tourism industry
Presented South Africa merely as an exotic landscape.'*
It's my friend, on TV, the minister,
*'Now communities must learn
To package themselves and their cultures.'*

I think of poetry — when
There's a sudden, flouncing, knock-kneed
Holding up of skirts that's neither
Exotic nor packaged
As the heron bolts off in pursuit of minnow

A digestive shaking of her neck tells the outcome.
And then she returns composed
Back to place, her neck a supple rod,
Her beak a poised cast.

I think, as I was saying, of poetry
The least commodified of arts,
Solitary, a bit, given to outburst
Suspicious of shine, wakeful to slipperiness
Each line weighted just so,
Insisting on the actual, unpackaged, this-sidedness of things.

Tenacious to place,
 Standing its ground,
 Whatever the highway behind.

(Cronin 2006 47–48)

The opening stanza situates the speaker's attention spatially, even geographically, in a region of Kwazulu Natal that is dominated by the monoculture of sugar cane. At the Tongati river estuary this appears as the 'miles of cane field' that have displaced diverse ecosystems and required too, as one of the strategies of Empire, the displacement of large numbers of people across the planet. Beginning in 1860, around 150,000 people were shipped from India to the region to work as indentured labourers. In the poem, this history is present to the senses in 'the indentured smell of molasses' — the sweetness of sugar infused with the bitterness of a labour system that originally made it possible. David Lincoln has described the social order that controlled the early production of sugar as 'an ascendant sugarocracy' (Lincoln 1988 1). Cronin's suggestion that the smell of molasses remains, even today, 'indentured', indicates that labour practices in the current industry are not much improved.

Through this highly managed environment the old river flows, or rather (because of the season, or siltation from the canefields, or both) it 'trickles', passing under the M4 motorway before it reaches the sea. This highway, which runs parallel to the South Coast, is the route that takes the land's sweet freight to Durban, South Africa, and the world. Tongati, Tongaat, Tongaat-Hulett: the region is the executive centre of an industry that today produces more than two million tons of sugar per year, and this road is the pathway that links it to the market. This could seem to suggest that whatever occurs at this location on the map is inescapably conditioned by the global networks of trade and power that track through the region: the mill trucks pass by noisily with their burden of sugar, exhaling carbon fumes.

Yet in the next stanza the point of view shifts from a wide spatial perspective to the minute particularity of minnows in an inch of water. The fish are tiny, 'the size of small coins', and where they occur it is fluid, watery, ephemeral, a place 'that might be lifted / On a fringe of an incoming wave-surge'. To notice the minnows at all, or to observe the transient presence of a single wave flipping them up into the air, requires from the observer a radical change in focal setting: from the spatial view to the specificity of place, from 150 years' history of sugar to a single moment as the wave turns over, from the economies of a global industry to a few small coins. Shifting then into a more lyrical voice, Cronin evokes both this specific and lively reach of water at the meeting of sea and river, and the act of attention that is required in order to perceive its activity.

This attitude of mind is a central concern of the poem. Sand, river, minnows; the particular ecosystem calls forth the heron, fishing: 'Which is why she is here

/ All afternoon, holding fast to place'. Like the flamingoes at Kamfers Dam, the heron is made of the patterns of fish and water, and because, in this sense, organism and habitat are one system, this particular location on the Tongati river lagoon is precisely 'Heron's Place', *her* place, a realm inhabited, if not possessed, by someone other than Tongaat-Hulett, someone who is not even a human being. In this respect, the bird in the poem has 'agency'. Her activity is unambiguously intentional, and the speaker is looking not primarily at her, but at her act of attention — what might be called her 'gaze', its vigilance and responsiveness. But what interests me is not, primarily, whether or not the heron as nonhuman subject is sentient (she clearly is), but rather what her solitary presence at the water's edge and in the poem conveys about place, specificity and attention. The term is first used in the title and then repeated four times: 'place.' I understand it to refer here to a particular location that is known and intimately inhabited, with connotations of dwelling, of being at home. At the same time, to speak of place is also to imply a way of seeing and understanding the world that is potentially quite radical. As Tim Cresswell describes this:

When we look at the world as a world of places we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience. Sometimes this way of seeing can seem to be an act of resistance against a rationalization of the world, a way of seeing that has more space than place. (Cresswell 2004: 11)

Whereas late modern industrialised human beings have often been described as being displaced, placeless, dislocated, homeless and even 'off-ground', what the heron in the poem is doing could not be more specifically located: her survival quite simply depends on it, on 'pinning down the specific', in the place where she is at home. So complete is her attention therefore that the vehicles of business and industry, the 'heavy-duty mill trucks / That grind the highway behind', seem (though the human speaker reminds us of their reality) quite irrelevant to what she is engaged with.

But stories of place cannot for long hold off narratives of dispossession and loss, particularly in South Africa. The next stanza moves from an ecological understanding of the heron-in-her-place to an image of people from the nearby squatter camp who are fishing in the sea. Making a home amid the remnant of indigenous coastal bush that has somehow endured the imposition of the cane fields, the fishermen, like the heron, are solitary, marginal, and attentive to the particulars of survival in this environment. Unlike her, the human inhabitants of the area bear more visibly the marks of a troubled economic history — 'Most of them the unemployed-retrenched / Some still wearing frayed mill overalls' — and because of this history the human beings, like the heron, are fishing in pursuit of 'protein', their lines weighted with old spark plugs. By representing them in this way, Cronin characteristically evokes a picture of ordinary people's resilience, ingenuity and commitment to survival under conditions of exploitation and

injustice. In many of his poems ‘the oppressed’ may be embattled, bewildered and suffering, but they are never simply victims. In the poem, ‘Faraway city, there’, for example, the people of Cape Town are ‘unshakeably / defiant, frightened, broken / and unbreakable’ and the shack-dwellers whose homes have been demolished will rebuild them yet again (Cronin 1983 71). Twenty-three years later he sets the bravery and solidarity of communist comrades in the Nazi death camps, and the lively tenacity of kerb-side culture in a post-apartheid South African city against the totalising master narratives of Soviet doctrine and (later) the neo-liberal project of corporate globalisation (Cronin 2006 16–23). In ‘Heron’s Place’, the confluence of river, bird, people and ‘vestigial’ forest evokes, I think, a similar affirmation.

In all this, Cronin’s view of the Tongati estuary and its human and nonhuman inhabitants could be described in terms of what Tim Ingold has called ‘the temporality of the landscape’. Here the relational, even ecological, view which Ingold calls a ‘dwelling perspective’ sees the living landscape as being constituted as ‘an enduring record of — and testimony to — the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves’ (Ingold 152). In Cronin’s poem, the patterns of activity of sugar barons, canfields, workers and birds inform and are informed by the conditions of this particular landscape, for as Ingold puts it, ‘it is in the very process of dwelling that these forms are constituted’ (162).

By contrast, the fifth stanza introduces another way of seeing landscape, and another sort of industry: ‘*In the past, the tourism industry / Presented South Africa merely as an exotic landscape*’. Someone is being quoted here who is critical of an old-style form of cultural imperialism in which the country was presented simply as a scenic object, without real people. This view may well have instrumentalised the environment (constructed it as a scenic object, a touristic resource) as much as the sugar barons did with their fields of monoculture, but it is now, the speaker tells us, something of the past. Nowadays South Africa is not (as some of the early explorers may have imagined, and subsequent colonial discourses reiterated) just ‘landscape’. It is inhabited by real people, ‘communities’ in fact, people who must become empowered: ‘*Now communities must learn,*’ but here in the moment of a single line-break the discourse transforms itself yet again ‘*To package themselves and their cultures*’. The source of the utterance is someone with whom the main speaker in the poem shares the ambiguous association of several roles: ‘It’s my friend, on TV, the minister’. Though Cronin simply quotes the actual words without comment, in the context of the poem the statement resonates quite disturbingly. The verb ‘to package’ evokes at one level a summoning together of (soon-to-be-discarded) paper, plastic, advertising, graphic design, coloured inks and so on in order to wrap and sell a particular product; but it also suggests, more generally, the containment and reification of people and ecosystems involved in a culture of commodification and in the global pervasiveness of ‘the market’. The point of view here echoes the poem ‘End of

the Century — which is why wipers' (from the same collection) in which the global phenomenon he calls managerialism zombifies our diverse humanity into 'one thing all — clients' (Cronin 2006 22). In 'Heron's Place' the critique is less direct, but the irony is clear and somewhat tragic: notwithstanding the liberatory convictions of the social movements that brought the new State into being, the post-Apartheid government's promotion of a brand called 'South Africa' turns people and environments into commodities. Rather too much like the Tongaat-Hulett company which made the sugar barons rich and powerful, this industry appears as yet another node in the trading networks of corporate globalisation that reduce the myriad diversities of the earth and its inhabitants to the poverty of monoculture.

Whatever it could mean to market or package one's culture (let alone oneself), the implied question leads to a self-reflexive thought about the cultural practice of poetry — this is, after all, a poem — but at once this thought is interrupted by the immediacy of the heron, who has just seen a minnow. Breaking through the observer's abstract reverie, the bird is all action and singleness of intention: 'sudden, flouncing, knock-kneed' the heron who bolts off in search of minnow is 'neither exotic nor packaged', nobody's object. Her presence and irreducible reality are represented as being something unarguable, ordinary and simple, whose purpose is pursued quite independently of human culture and exists outside of language. This is it (the poem would seem to suggest) — not words about the thing but the thing itself. If the heron's dive is described as a 'holding up of skirts', and her neck is 'a supple rod', her beak 'a poised cast', the effect is not so much anthropomorphic or metaphoric (suggesting simply that the heron is like a very skilled human being, fishing). Rather, it seems to me that by representing her in this way as a 'person', Cronin is suggesting the continuities between the situated practice that the heron is engaged in and human practices — fishing and poetry, for example. For again, there is a certain self-reflection here, as this depiction of the heron is itself a demonstration of the poet's tools of fine attention and what has been called the 'sympathetic imagination'. Their activity in this case is to evoke a one-pointed awareness that (at least in the momentary dive of a particular image or phrase) manifests bird — fish — water — place as a single, non-dual system. In the momentary absorption of the heron's dive (as indicated in a couple of lines of poetry) the world is indivisible: not two.

Once the heron has eaten her minnow the speaker returns to reflect on poetry. By contrast with the TV injunction for communities to package themselves and their culture, this sort of practice is 'the least commodified of arts,' and (like the heron and the fishermen), somewhat 'solitary'. Here again, the relation between bird and people seems to me not so much a case of metaphor or analogy as of correspondence or resonance. The heron, the fishermen and the practice of poetry have in common a quality of attention and precision, of solitariness and endurance, a position in the social order that is situated on the margins of the

economies of big capital, and exhibits a certain resilience. In all, the integrity of their activity derives from its locatedness in the minute particulars of place: ‘Tenacious to place, / Standing its ground’.

What sort of poetry or cultural practice does this imply? Whereas the flamingoes at Kamfers Dam are a pink, chattering multitude, lotuses blooming in the city’s excrement, the heron is usually grey or brown, and solitary in habits. The sort of poetry she calls to mind is this-worldly in focus, attentively crafted, ‘suspicious of shine’, and persists against the grain of the mainstream media. It is also, crucially and in several respects, ‘wakeful’. In an earlier poem, ‘Even the Dead,’ Cronin uses a characteristic combination of playfully conversational tone and abstract reflection to put it like this:

I am not sure what poetry is. I am not sure what the aesthetic is. Perhaps the aesthetic should be defined in opposition to anaesthetic.

Art is the struggle to stay awake.

Which makes amnesia the true target and proper subject of poetry. (Cronin 1997 40)

In ‘Heron’s Place’, the practice of wakefulness involves an insistence on ‘the actual, unpackaged, this-sidedness of things’, on the specificity of living beings, systems and places that the highways of the market economy bypass, and the grand vision from above overlooks. This emphasis recurs in Cronin’s poetry. What is perhaps his most widely anthologised poem describes the intimately situated knowledge that is needed if poets (and South Africans generally) are to learn ‘how to speak with the voices of this land’ (Cronin 1983 58). Again in his recent collection, the poem ‘End of the Century — which is why wipers’ foregrounds the improbable metaphor of the action (or ‘activism’) of a pair of windscreen wipers that turns ‘grand vision into rhythm’, and makes possible a certain clarity of (ironic, ambiguous, particular, located) vision in the midst of the ‘global, homogenised, totalitarian deluge’ in which late twentieth-century people are awash (Cronin 2006 16–23). As this suggests, in the more recent writing, the earlier target of racial capitalism and the apartheid state have to some extent been replaced by a critique of the local impacts of corporate globalisation and the relative unfreedom of contemporary South Africans. The anger and sadness evoked in this struggle to stay awake against the easy appeal of amnesia is sometimes very harsh. In a poem about HIV/AIDS, he says, ‘It’s not as bad as they say. They say because / Perhaps / it’s worse’ (2006 62). Yet the articulation of a problem is not the same as despair, and Cronin’s poetic voice maintains a tone of determined hopefulness.

This is part of what (for me) makes the poetry compelling — but what sort of affirmation is it actually making? Earlier this year in a course on literature and the environment, I asked a group of undergraduate English students to make a list of non-commodified activities, relationships and skills that are valued and shared (not bought and sold) in their homes and communities. This exercise was in response to a question that the educationalist C.A. Bowers has suggested could

be used as a starting point with students for examining alternatives to the symbolic infrastructure that supports globalised commodification. He puts it like this: ‘Are there any aspects of individual and community experience that have not been commodified and calculated as part of the gross domestic product?’ (Bowers 161). Sadly, most of the students could hardly think of anything much, and by the end of the class many of us felt rather dispirited. Along with a recognition of their / our implicatedness in an (environmentally and socially unsustainable) commodified culture, came a sense of our all being what Ray Dasmann influentially called ‘biosphere people’.¹ As globalised human beings (one rule of thumb says that everyone who has access to a private car is a member of the global North) our food, friends, energy, water, ideas and so on tend to come from (and our wastes disappear to) places we have never seen — everywhere in the world but the immediate environments in which we live.

In ‘Heron’s Place’, the highway, with its freight of sugar and other commodities, is the clearest manifestation of this form of civilisation. Like the shopping mall and the uniform housing development, the modern freeway has been described as one of the architectural expressions of displacement, a structure which discourages any sense of rootedness, responsibility or belonging (Orr 127). Set against the scale and pace and particularity of the Tongati estuary, and its lively diversity, the highway is big, fast, noisy and impersonal, a single route through the territory, a link in the grid of global trade. In connecting the stories of sugar, marketing, monoculture and corporate globalisation in this way, the poem evokes questions that many of us are asking in different ways about the pervasive ecological and social impact of global neo-liberalism: Is it possible to resist? To act in good faith? Though Cronin does not answer such questions directly, the poem ends with the affirmation of a kind of practice (poetry for instance) whose integrity derives from its insistence on ‘the actual, unpackaged, this-sidedness of things’, a practice of vigilance, locatedness, and specificity. Where the highway embodies a spatial or geographical view of the territory from above, as a location on the map, the poem that invokes it is about the intimate, wakeful, situated knowledge of place. It concludes with an assertion of the resilience of this attitude of mind that the heron embodies: ‘Tenacious to place / Standing its ground / Whatever the highway behind’.

The confidence of this conclusion makes me wonder whether an immersion in reading and/or writing the poetry of place might help my students find alternatives to commodified culture or even discover the tools or the intention to resist it. One could of course point out that while herons, fishermen and poets may disregard the highway (whatever highway), in order to get on with their solitary practice, the highway itself remains unaffected. Or one could say that place-based political activism does not necessarily translate into broader engagement. In terms of collective action, as David Harvey has noted, while oppositional social movements may be very efficient at organising ‘in place’, they tend to be relatively

disempowered when it comes to organising across space. In fact, he says, ‘In clinging to place bound identity, such oppositional movements become a part of the very fragmentation which a mobile capitalism and flexible accumulation can feed on’ so that while they may be excellent bases for political action, ‘they cannot bear the burden of radical historical change alone’ (Harvey qtd in Ruiters 2002: 121). Perhaps too, this is the point at which to remember that the author of ‘Heron’s Place’ is not only a poet or a solitary heron at the water’s edge. As Deputy General Secretary of the SACP Cronin regularly assumes a public voice that articulates a vision for transformation that is drawn in the large outlines of a national narrative. In this context the standpoint that he assumes in relation to the networks of global trade and industry is what might be called spatial — a view of the territory from above. In a recent interview, for example, in response to questions about the Party’s stance on state ownership of industry he says, ‘The real question is: how do we take strategic control over the character of our development?’ (Cronin 2007 12). This is surely neither the heron nor the place-based poet speaking, though the concerns about the globalised market remain. Does this make it contradictory? Will the real Cronin stand up?

I think not. Multiple visions, or seeing from different places, is after all, one of the things that some of us sentient beings do rather well. Herons, for example, and flamingoes may be intimately located amid the mud and fish of particular waters, but they cannot be limited to the single vision of one point of view. Birds move. They fly. The bird’s eye sees the world from above as well as from below. The migratory communities track far across the planet and back each year — highways of multitudes, calling to each other as they go. This essay has been concerned with situatedness in place, but surely both ‘place’ and ‘space’ are available and necessary to people as metaphors for locatable vision and engagement.

Beyond this, I have no answers as to how to wake my students (or even myself) up from the amnesias of a commodified, atomised, alienated life. But beginning with a place, or places, or ‘where you come from’, is one way of making a start. In this regard, reading a poem can then become quite instructive: to look very closely at the tracks and lives which take form in the estuary of a river near a national road, to look at a heron fishing in the rippled stream, and at spark-plugs recycled for weighting a line. If, as ecologists and others have demonstrated, each node in the natural/cultural network connects to all the others, then the vision of particularity is not an alternative to other forms of seeing but a way into them. A poem about a bird can be a picture of the world.

Perhaps birds can be free then, after all. Perhaps freedom is always contingent. Like the rest of us the birds arise and pass away in the rhizome of interdependent being — feet wading in the toxic mud of fertilizer and waste, plastic down the gullet, twine in the wing. The predictions for our common future are disturbing, particularly in the South. For birds, as much as for us human beings, extinction is really possible. But, so far at least, herons and flamingoes continue to fish and

fly, and their absorption in the work of survival is complete. May they endure the consequences of fossil-fuel and of the highways which certain of our kind have built. And perhaps (at least sometimes) we human beings may remember to be birds.

NOTES

- ¹ First used in 1974, Dasmann's term indicates a form of human social organisation which draws on the entire biosphere for its resources, as distinct from 'ecosystem people' whose consumption is more regionally specific. See his discussion of this in *Called by the Wild: The Autobiography of a Conservationist* (152f.)

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