

Poet, Tree: Martin Harrison's 'Red Gum'

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I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as.
—Joyce Kilmer

Martin Harrison's second Australian collection of verse, *The Kangaroo Farm*, was published in 1997 by Paper Bark Press. After his passing in 2014, a number of poets looked back on that moment and recalled their first impressions. Adam Aitken recounts being 'struck by where it sat in relation to the discussions various poetry people were having at that time': his verse 'was at a slant to Les Murray's and Robert Gray's' 'grounded in a different kind of cosmopolitan life, in pleasure and matter, in an emotional and perceptual experience that is not constrained by any Australian nationalistic poetic.' Petra White remembers reading *The Kangaroo Farm* while 'camping on the Murray in Cobram' and finding 'Harrison's vivid evocations of the landscapes' compelling: 'His sense of light, the gristliness of things, the sounds, the movement of kingfishers. It was a world made up of particular details, of things attempted to be seen as they are, rather than being embroidered into any overarching narrative or self-proclaiming poetic.' Peter Boyle reports being less enthusiastic. He considered off-putting 'the way the speaking rational voice maintains control, holding itself together, with the detailed specifics of settings to balance what is being contemplated.' 'It is a poetry that has taken me a long time to appreciate properly, to grasp with the right openness.'

These writers supply a list of key words that can serve as a concise introduction to Harrison's central preoccupations during the 1990s: perception, emotion, nation, landscape, sight, movement, detail, sound. This article continues their memory-work, shuttling between today and yesterday, to elucidate why these topics mattered so much to Harrison two decades ago—and to assess the extent to which deeper familiarity with his particular configuration of concerns can help critics better engage more recent writing. It examines closely one of his poems from *Kangaroo Farm*, 'Red Gum,' in an effort to clarify his poetics, that is, to limn his goals, his risks, and his accomplishments. The last part of the essay proceeds contrapuntally, comparing Harrison's to a more recent poem, Fiona Hile's 'Stripes' (2013), and illustrating the value for literary criticism of what Nishant Shahania calls a 'flexible circularity' between past and present moments (10).

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When *The Kangaroo Farm* first appeared, Australian poetry was going through one of its periodic phases of crisis and renewal. Large publishing houses—Angus & Robertson, Heinemann, Penguin, Picador—were aggressively trimming or dropping their poetry lists. Small, independent presses were perforce taking up the slack. Paper Bark, like Five Islands Press, was a bit of a veteran, dating

from the mid-1980s, but other players were arriving on the scene, for instance Brandl & Schlesinger (founded 1994), Giramondo (1995), Black Pepper (1996), and Duffy & Snellgrove (1996). Important new journals and reviews were appearing, such as *HEAT* (first issue 1996), *Boxkite* (1997), and *Cordite* (1997).¹ In retrospect, one can single out, too, other significant milestones. The ezine *Jacket* (1997–2010) was conceived as an exclusively online venture that targeted an international as well as a domestic audience. In 1996 Ouyang Yu began editing the bilingual Chinese-English literary journal *Otherland* (*Yuanxiang*). In short, Harrison's *Kangaroo Farm* dates not only from a period of creative ferment but also a time when Australian poetry was becoming newly, differently outward-looking.

One of the best guides to the later 1990s happens to be Harrison's own *Who Wants to Create Australia? Essays on Poetry and Ideas in Contemporary Australia* (2004), which was selected by the *Times Literary Supplement* as a book of the year. The pieces in that volume take up a series of issues that were on the front burner for poets and critics at the turn of the millennium: the impact of the digital communications revolution on literary production; the deleterious effects of poststructuralist philosophy on writerly style; the inappropriateness of genius-parades and genealogies as default models for literary history; the search for usable post-Cold War, postnationalist frames for discussing literature; and an uneasiness regarding the institutionalisation of creative writing as an academic discipline. The book also advances the thesis that in the 1990s 'self and place' remained as central as ever in Australian poetry, albeit, as David McCooy concisely puts it, 'updated as subjectivity, the environment, and the senses' (66). Harrison, in other words, approaches place phenomenologically, as something that a particular individual perceives, indeed as something partially created in and through an act of perception, even as it simultaneously shapes and transforms that perceiver.² This line of argument—which we might now call *ecological* or *ecopoetic*—has influenced a number of younger poet-critics, including Bonny Cassidy, Kate Fagan, Michael Farrell, and Corey Wakeling.³

His poetry, of course, has also served as a literary model for writers who explore what it means to inhabit and traverse natural and built environments. Stuart Cooke writes that in *The Kangaroo Farm* he discovered 'a poet obsessed with the moment of perception, with the way it is received and then felt.' The book 'revealed a very keen awareness, in a self-reflexive sense, of exactly where he was in space; his language gently probed, and discovered, and then contemplated.' Cooke was particularly drawn to 'the long, flamboyant lines' that permitted room for 'a kind of lyrical essay,' a 'meta-poetry' that is 'not only concerned with talking about the world, but with the way we talk about the world as well.' Geoff Page, too, praises Harrison's 'essays in verse' in *The Kangaroo Farm*, its 'longish poems' that feature 'a curious mixture of both leisureliness and concision, of talkativeness and intensity.' 'Harrison likes to catch things on the edge of awareness, at the moment of apprehension. The language he uses to do this is often dense and highly imagistic but capable, too, of colloquial turns which tie it to the world of social interchange as well as to the private world of poetic speculation.'

These generalisations fit many of the best poems in Harrison's collection, including 'The Platypus,' 'The Tasmanian Tiger,' and 'Stopping for a Walk in Reserved Land Near Murra Murra.' 'Red Gum' illustrates especially well the poet's characteristic use of 'long, flamboyant lines' to explore 'the moment of perception.' The poem describes fancifully and at length a harbour-side wind-blown eucalyptus:

Gusts and gusts of invisible wind shake the branches
 into horse-heads, neighing and rearing, into shoals of silver—
 let loose, they're mares floury with dusty evening light
 under trees, in a paddock, back of the mind. Spring wind blasts them,
 turns them back to main-street bunting rattling, triangular, overhead.
 It crackles the leaves like a fire that's burning up too fast, too dry.
 Against grey-blue water, the red gum's sinewy branches shine.
 Behind it, yacht masts and yellow water taxis cutting their wakes.
 Across the bay, particles of cars glide by, silent as a museum's dust. (94)

There are touches of descriptive realism here—'gusts of . . . wind shake the branches,' 'Behind it [are] yacht masts and yellow water taxis,' 'Across the bay . . . cars glide by'—but the poem primarily concerns itself with delivering one metaphor after another. The tree and its 'shak[ing]' leaves are compared to horses, running water, 'bunting,' and a 'crackl[ing]' fire. These comparisons, moreover, sometimes overlap, as when 'horse-heads' and 'shoals of silver' appear in the same sentence, and other times they come and go, the 'floury' look produced by the 'dusty evening light,' for example, prefiguring the 'particles of cars . . . silent as a museum's dust.' This haphazard profusion of figurative language produces a near-Baroque thickness of rhetoric. Also Baroque-like are the repetitions ('gusts and gusts,' 'into . . . into,' 'too . . . too'); the redundancies ('invisible wind,' 'a fire that's burning'); the trailing syntax ('under trees, in a paddock, back of the mind,' 'rattling, triangular, overhead'); and the reliance not on narrative but on repetition and variation to advance the verse ('invisible wind . . . Spring wind,' 'Against . . . Behind . . . Across'). Instead of striving for clarity or concision, Harrison amplifies, elaborates, and riffs. 'Red Gum' emphasises its speaker's restless and fecund inventiveness as, moment to moment, he strives to find word-equivalents to what he sees and hears and to what he thinks and feels in response.

Why write in such a manner? Asked about *Kangaroo Farm* in a 1997 interview, Harrison explains his work by locating it within a literary-historical genealogy. He declares himself 'a sort of Imagist who lives seventy or eighty years after Imagism in a completely different intellectual and cultural environment and a different poetic environment.' While he admires 'the Imagist image' for its 'specificity,' 'precision,' and 'sense of immediacy,' he cannot himself write chiselled, compact poems like H.D.'s 'Pear Tree' and Ezra Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro.' 'I am interested,' he says, 'in connectives—in how things connect, how the eye wanders from here to there. How when you're looking at someone having a coffee in the street and at the same time you're having a conversation with someone else. Maybe the radio is on in the background. They are ambiances as precise as the Imagist image. Therefore, you have to go about them in a different way.' 'Red Gum' exemplifies this 'different way': it meanders, free-associates, and accumulates. In the process, it reveals as much about the operations of a perceiving mind as it does about its ostensible subject matter, a tree seen outside a window.

The resulting poem, significantly, is not a compilation of scattered, impressionistic jottings. Harrison shapes his observations into an argument. It proceeds in three movements, each unfurling over the course of a variable-length verse paragraph. First he introduces the poem's *idée fixe*—'wind . . . thrashes the red gum'—and ponders whether anyone could ever accurately depict such a dynamic, mutable scene. 'A camera could catch it. Or a video,' he muses at first, but then he goes on to conclude that the red gum, as he experiences it, gives rise to a series of 'images' that

‘will never be finished, never held / even by the best of visualists.’ Poetry, though, as a verbal art, is capable of superimposition, equivocation, and other means of conveying what it means for a thing to exist processually, in a perpetually half-between state of transition: ‘The reds of this red tree dazzle and blur, both cochineal and stain of flying ants.’

The second phase of the argument begins with a declaration of, if not vocation, then obligation: ‘So I’m stuck with a red tree. And blue waters.’ As a poet, Harrison is ‘stuck’ with the task of representing parts and aspects of a world to which visual artists cannot do justice. What follows is the passage quoted earlier, in which the speaker tries out different metaphors, slowing down and lingering over his impressions of and responses to a wind-thrashed tree. Implicitly, he is engaging in a *paragone*, a demonstration of the superiority of poetry over painting—‘A painter can’t’—and technologies of visual reproduction more generally. The flow of language, he hopes to prove, can track the mobility of a mind as it filters, organises, and makes sense of sense-data. An utterance can change direction and inflection mid-course, repeatedly, whereas a visual image, even an animated one, extracts and frames an interval of time and a particular configuration of percepts such that they are removed from, and thus untrue to, entities and realities that, by their very nature, remain in constant flux.

If the second section of the poem stresses the poet’s initiative and efficacy, the third and final movement in its argument is concessive and qualifying. The speaker places himself in the poem not as a detached disembodied observer but as someone going about a daily routine: ‘I make coffee, think of the washing. I’ll spend the day looking at pictures: / slides of someone’s work. There’ll be lunch, maybe a half hour at the indoors pool.’ The red gum now acquires the power to act, that is, to intrude on, to insert itself into, the poet’s sphere of attention: ‘All the while, the red tree flickers and threshes, an image from a shaky aerial. Against the blue, its curtain’s like a crimson smear, a fishing-net of shadows.’ By the end of the lyric, the speaker confesses to feeling overwhelmed by the ‘storm-tossed red gum’ that ‘burns its way into the mind, under thought and reference’ and whose ‘forest of sun-lit fire’ succeeds in ‘taking over everything around it, / whether neighbouring roofs or the gulls battling the Heads.’ The poem may begin by exalting a poet’s ability to represent what he or she sees, but it finishes by reversing the tables, suggesting that what and how poets see is beyond their control. Things can exert an mysterious fascination and can compel writers to write. What at first promised to be a statement about poetry’s relation to contemporary visual culture turns out to be something quite different, an illustration that perception involves distributed agency and collaborative co-creation. A tree insistently asserts itself, and a poet replies.

In ‘Red Gum,’ the eucalyptus exhibits what Timothy Morton describes as the ‘density’ and ‘unpredictab[ility]’ of the ‘strange stranger,’ a part of the ‘background’ environment that has a bewildering tendency to move into the ‘frontal foreground’ (171–72). The tree’s initial appearance in the poem is weirdly monster-like—it has ‘tentacle flowers’ and ‘blood-red new leaves’—and thereafter it covertly and overtly threatens the speaker’s complacent presumption of autonomy and self-mastery. The tree discomfits the speaker because it is differently, estrangingly embodied. Its combination of rootedness and motion, its persistence in place and its variegated flashes of colour, are reminders that it is possible to inhabit and thrive in a city such as Sydney without acting like a human or aspiring toward human ends. One does not have to leave Earth to encounter an alien species.

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This account of 'Red Gum' has so far left out a key component of Harrison's poetics, the influence, as Geoff Page says, of a person's participation in 'the world of social interchange' on the 'moment of apprehension.' Let's return to the poem's third verse paragraph:

All morning the flat is full of slanting diamond light and sun,
 probing, like a philosopher, this side and that. A wall, a bit
 of floor, a bookshelf: and then, again the tree,
 like a gigantic window-cleaner, looming at the window. No Oak
 of Dodona, its variable upsets the equation. Its clouds glitter,
 promising richness, quite other than a tranquil view,
 an aspect taken in across the land: a prospect of water-meadows,
 a few cows. Or a portrait with brilliant drapery. Who was it
 said the wind is 'boneless'? The ghost's rattling its maraca,
 making words impossible. (94)

By now, the logic informing this passage should be familiar. The speaker gradually settles into, feels increasingly at home in, his 'flat,' watching the play of 'light and sun' over well known, interior things, a 'wall, a bit / of floor, a bookshelf.' The tree, though, again intrudes, 'looming' outside his window in a manner eerily both human and monstrous ('gigantic window-cleaner'). Its presence 'upsets the equation,' that is, undermines the speaker's pleasure in inhabiting a secure, enclosed, controlled space. The response here as elsewhere in the poem to the stubborn persistent *thereness* of the tree is to generate figurative language, as if finding the right image or comparison could render the 'strange stranger' less 'upsetting.' Its fluttering leaves resemble 'clouds' that 'glitter'; their rustling produces a sound like a 'maraca'; they clothe the tree like 'brilliant drapery.' Harrison tests, too, the possible painterly genre in which this red gum might appear, perhaps amid a landscape ('a prospect of water-meadows, / a few cows') or as the subject of a 'portrait.' Neither of those options is fully satisfying. The tree is too obtrusive, too much part of the 'foreground,' to fit smoothly into a wide-sweep landscape. Too, although weirdly animate and particularized, the gum is a faceless non-sentient plant, not a human sitting and posing in hopes of being immortalised. Altogether, the gum resembles a 'ghost,' an ontologically troublesome entity that straddles categories, eludes precise definition ('making words impossible'), and has a tendency to haunt and vex people who would prefer to lay it to rest, to make it behave in a more 'tranquil' manner.

The poem thus revisits a very old insight. Language's inability to represent the world fully, accurately, and once-and-for-all turns out to be a terrifically productive starting point for writing verse. A poet can disport endlessly in (or lament loudly and long) the slippery imperfect fit between language and world. Harrison, of course, is aware that he is revisiting a venerable topos. He does not pretend to approach this particular encounter between human and tree as if it were Edenic and originary. When he states that the gum is 'No Oak / of Dodona,' he alludes to the 'holy deep-leaved oak tree' to which, as Homer puts it, pilgrims went to 'listen / To the will of Zeus,' the oracular whispers audible when wind blew through its branches (218). Asking himself in an aside 'Who was it / said the wind is "boneless,"' Harrison is recollecting, too, Hesiod's *Works and Days*, in which the cold north wind is compared to 'a Boneless One . . . gnawing on his foot.' That peculiar simile, Gregory Nagy explains, has a folkloric basis. Hesiod was thinking of an octopus,

‘an animal that is conventionally pictured in Greek lore as eating its own feet when it is hungry’ (82). The north wind, in other words, is like a starving animal, moving restlessly through a cold, dead, wintry landscape. ‘Red Gum’ self-consciously positions itself in relation to the Greek wellsprings of Western poetics.

Harrison also evokes Australian literary history. More specifically, he appears to have in mind a book by one of his favourite writers, David Campbell’s *The Branch of Dodona and Other Poems* (1970).⁴ That collection contains two extended sequences: ‘Works and Days,’ which freely adapts and updates Hesiod’s account of rural Greece to apply to Australia, and ‘The Branch of Dodona,’ which retells the story of Jason and the Argonauts. The titular ‘branch’ is a ‘plank’ that, according to Apollonius of Rhodes, was ‘fashioned from an oak of Dodona’ by the goddess Athena and ‘set in the middle of the keel’ of the Argo and that, at a crucial juncture, ‘spoke with a human voice’ and prophesied that the ship’s crew would ‘not escape from their suffering on the vast ocean’ until Circe the sorceress ‘cleansed’ them of their sins (112).

The Branch of Dodona as a whole represents an experiment in employing stories, themes, and tropes identified with Classical Greece as vehicles for commenting on Australian national identity at the height of the Vietnam War. In ‘The Magic Bough,’ for instance, the branch announces that ‘The good light of dawn has gone / With the colours of the sun,’ and it condemns the Argonauts to an Eliotic fate:

Alone, you will know fear.
 Each joy will be a task,
 You will doubt your skill
 And your will to endure
 Behind your mask;
 You will practise deceptions
 On yourself and others,
 Despise your brothers
 And your need of brothers,
 And envy the dead
 As you reach the conclusion
 That dying is easier said than done. (59)

In such verse, one hears what Nicolas Birns has identified as a leitmotif in Australian literature since the 1960s, a sense that ‘the Australia one loves is always dying’ (237). In place of mateship, common cause, and national triumph, Campbell foresees self-doubt, deception, isolation, and doom. Ancient Greece may provide poetic tools fitting for a time of national crisis, but in this case they also expose the decadence of the postcolonial present by encouraging an unflattering compare-and-contrast between then and now.

Why does Harrison plop such heavy literary baggage into his poem? He introduces them so as to negate and transcend them. The red gum is singled out as ‘No Oak of Dodona,’ a tree *unlike* the Greek oracle, and Hesiod appears only as a trace, by way of a single word whose source is effaced, nearly forgotten. The poem, in other words, reprises another conventional topos in literature by Australians of European descent: the continent’s flora, fauna, and geography are so foreign, so un-

Western, that writers must set aside tradition and re-learn their craft through direct observation and trial and error. *The Branch of Dodona* is an apt intertext for a poem such as ‘Red Gum.’ Campbell’s book grapples indirectly but seriously with the role that Western poetics, Homer to present, ought to play in his nation’s future, given the passage of the *Migration Act* of 1966 and the subsequent loosening of the White Australia Policy. Does the Oak of Dodona, he implicitly asks, have any message for us, beyond predicting the end of civilisation-as-we-have-known-it? Post-*Mabo*, Harrison, too, attends to a tree-oracle—a native Australian one this time—but he hears nothing intelligible or paraphrasable, receives no clear instructions, records no gnomic prophecy. Amid Sydney’s urban millions, he notes only the uncanny, unassimilable, persistent forcefulness of the natural world’s claim on his attention.

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Twenty years after its first publication, ‘Red Gum’ can feel a bit dated. It depends on a reader’s assent to a particular fiction. One agrees, that is, for the length of the poem, to assume that, yes, the poem’s speaker truly does see a tree out the window, and that the drama that ensues is psychological, perceptual, and embodied as well as linguistic. Such an encounter may be multiply mediated, and it may necessarily be inflected through prior viewings and readings, but the poem nonetheless marks this event, this co-constituting exchange between ‘I’ and ‘red gum,’ as *meaningful*, worth attending to in an extended, memorialising manner.

On these counts, Harrison’s ‘Red Gum’ deserves to be juxtaposed with a more recent, sceptical poem, Fiona Hile’s ‘Stripes’ (2013). It starts with a tree ‘forcing itself’ on the speaker by behaving like an attention-starved toddler:

That scribbly gum is acting
out again, throwing its
fruit, forcing itself to
appear (3)

The poem’s mood then softens, becoming more reflective, as the shifting shadows cast by the gum distract ‘you’ (the speaker? the reader? an unnamed other?) from an earlier ‘loss’:

the vertical fins
outside the library window
won’t stop striping the scene
with dorsal light, shades
of all types filtering the
loss of that blossom
you twirled between your
finger and thumb (3)

There are a few shocks and peculiarities in this passage, such as the combination of very short lines and heavy enjambment, also an incipient but underdeveloped comparison between the tree and a fish (‘vertical fins . . . dorsal light’). Nevertheless, at this point in the poem, a Harrison-like meeting between self and place seems well underway. A gum out the window intervenes in the

space in which ‘you’ move, both provoking and ‘filtering’ an embodied memory (‘that blossom / you twirled between / your finger and thumb’). Outer tree and inner flower meet via the medium of ‘your’ flesh. Hile, however, quickly and decisively reframes this moment as not a phenomenological but a textual event, one, moreover, that has been ‘cut and paste’ into the poem from somewhere else:

collage and
cut-ups can only mean one
thing: what we’re half-seeing
through this collagen
opening is not what we’d
hoped, just another *Eucalyptus*
Haemastoma, calibrating the
thrill of the cut and paste. (3)

Some of the differences between Hile and Harrison are attributable to stylistic preferences. While he may not have employed them, the specific defamiliarising techniques here are recognisably modernist, and he would have understood their function. Hile’s sound play is deliberately flashy, a procession of hard *c*’s and *t*’s and sibilant *th*’s. The recurrence of ‘collage’ as ‘collagen’ is uncanny and disorienting, especially since ‘collagen / opening’ is simultaneously both suggestive and elusive. Is she referring to an eye’s iris? To the window? Unclear. Similarly disconcerting is the final oblique allusion to Sylvia Plath’s ‘Cut’ (‘What a thrill— / My thumb instead of a onion’ [235]). In Plath, a gush of blood comes accompanied by a feeling of life, at last, being experienced fully and intensely instead of muffled by domestic tedium. In ‘Stripes’ the ‘thrill’ is much reduced or ironised, a consequence of properly ‘calibrating’ the arrangement of found material to achieve particular effects.

A careful reader of Roland Barthes, the Harrison of the late 1990s would likely have identified all these gestures as ‘selective baffles’ that render a text rougher, odder, and more memorable and enticing (Barthes 27).⁵ He would also have readily grasped Hile’s invocation of word processing (‘cut and paste’) and her implicit association between the digital present and avant-gardes past (‘collage / and cut-ups’). He understood quite well that ‘information technology’ and ‘the instantaneity of media and global communications’ were instigating profound ‘changes in how we deal with information, store, access and memorise it,’ and he believed that ‘writers and critics’ would have to ‘think themselves anew’ as a consequence (*Who Wants* 93).

His prognostications, however, regarding exactly what and how writing would change were not exactly on target, especially his expectation that the ‘associative, so-called electronic logics of contemporary hypermedia’ would lead, through manic ‘hyperlinkage,’ to the dissolution of discrete works and that authorship would become reduced to ‘a design instrument which forms and follows linkages between points constructed as information centres (data banks, image repertoires, repertoires of sounds, moving images, interactive sites, live exchanges, live video-cams)’ (95). Like George Landow and many other 1990s scholars of new media, Harrison in his musings about the digital future overestimated (1) the degree of agency that authors would have, (2) the ready availability of high-quality strings-free ‘repertoires’ of content, and (3) the liberating potential of interactivity and link-clicking.

As Kenneth Goldsmith explains in ‘Always Almost Obsolete, Always Almost New’ (2010), the growth of the Internet has had different and unforeseen consequences. It has led to ‘language’ itself being ‘increasingly treated as a resource to be exploited, processed, and manipulated’ as it sluices in code-flows through ‘logistical networks, mechanized protocols, [and] pre-ordained structures.’ The corporatised and governmental ‘forces of measurement’ that determine which data travel where have ‘become increasingly accelerated, non-expressive, and non-locale based.’ For these reasons appropriation, collage, remix, and other techniques for remobilising prior texts have taken on urgency. Poets want to assert themselves somehow, to fight back against the systemic devaluing of the written word. They refuse to let ‘so much language be discarded, abandoned, [and] expended.’ Instead of offering a ludic curation of a thousand literary and performative delights, much of the best writing of the last twenty years, according to Goldsmith, ‘appears dissolute, attenuated, entropic, and amorphous’ when judged by ‘traditional criteria’ because it seizes on ‘residual words’ and, by reframing, redacting, and recirculating them, grants them more airtime and attention.

Hile’s ‘Stripes’ belongs to Goldsmith’s ‘new literary landscape.’ The scribbly gum in the poem’s first half ‘forc[es] itself’ into view and kicks off a chiasitic exchange between self and world, but that Harrison-esque arc is rudely interrupted by talk of ‘collage / and cut-ups’ because, from the beginning, Hile was self-consciously ventriloquising the *déjà dit*, the already said. She has ‘cut and paste’ into her poem a common figure in Australian poetry, the Wisdom Tree. In the databank under that heading one would find such pieces as Charles Harpur’s ‘The Voice of the Native Oak’ (1851), John Shaw Neilson’s ‘The Orange Tree’ (1921), Judith Wright’s ‘Scribbly-gum’ (1955), and Les Murray’s ‘The Flowering Eucalypt in Autumn’ (1983). Hile does not artfully allude to those precedents; she is not helpfully hyperlinking to them or indulging in the Barthesian pleasures of intertextuality; she is *faute de mieux* deploying a near-cliché. She is like Robert Rauschenberg assembling a combine out of items picked from a trash heap. She confesses that she is nostalgic for the old power accorded to poetic language, its ability to transfigure self and world—‘what we’re half-seeing . . . is not what we’d / hoped’—but she knows that everything that we might see or describe has always already been ‘calibrat[ed]’ and classified (*Eucalyptus haemastoma*), labelled and sorted, before we arrived on the scene. Harrison’s ‘Red Gum’ asks readers to imagine a poet looking out a window and writing in response. Hile seems to be sitting at a computer and moving words around a screen.

Are there continuities? If pressed, one could label both ‘Red Gum’ and ‘Stripes’ exercises in *posthuman thinking*, speculative attempts at redefining what it is to be human in an age when Enlightenment possessive individualism has lost its persuasiveness as a world-picture. Harrison’s poem explores the impact on knowledge and consciousness of *Mitsein*, a ‘being-with,’ a radically inhuman other, a plant. It invites readers to pause and ponder their place on a planet where a myriad of species exist, persist, and flourish. What does it mean to live in a universe that does not accord *Homo sapiens* primacy?⁶ Hile, in contrast, begins from, presumes, a decentred position. Language has ceased to be solely a human possession: it has become technologised, a resource managed by machines. From the content-stream she wrests and arranges words. For her, asserting oneself as a self is no longer a matter of speaking, of finding a voice. One must reframe language, render the impersonal personal, and revitalise deadwood.

The 1990s have passed into history. It does not follow that the texts and rhetorics from the decade have lost their value as models and inspirations. While a term such as *ecopoetics* can be misleading when applied to poetry that predates its popularisation, the world-historical problems with which today's self-styled ecopoets, radical pastoralists, and ecological activists concern themselves belong to a longer *durée*. It may be true, as John Ashbery once remarked, 'You can't say it that way anymore' (45). Now is not then, and new circumstances demand different strategies. The stakes, though, frequently remain much the same. Poetry refreshes.

NOTES

¹ See McCooey 63–64 for a survey of the structural shifts in the publication of poetry in Australia in the years 1990 to 2005.

² These generalisations about phenomenology, here and elsewhere in this essay, are based chiefly on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 'The Intertwining—The Chiasm' in his book *The Visible and the Invisible* 130–55.

³ See Cassidy, 'Reclaimed Land'; Fagan; and Farrell 1. 'Influence' here does not imply 'unreflective uptake.' See, e.g., Wakeling for both a respectful acknowledgment of and disagreement with Harrison. For an example of Harrison's later involvement in promoting and theorising what could be called ecopoetics (though he does not use the label), see the October 2013 special issue of *Text Journal* titled 'Writing Creates Ecology: Ecology Creates Writing' that he coedited with Deborah Bird Rose, Lorraine Shannon, and Kim Satchell, especially his essay 'The Act of Writing and the Act of Attention.'

⁴ For Harrison on Campbell, see, e.g., 'A Note on Language' and *Who Wants to Create Australia?* 31–32, 76–77, and 104.

⁵ For Harrison on Roland Barthes, see, e.g., *Who Wants to Create Australia?* 89–98.

⁶ Compare what Harrison says in an essay that dates from the same year as Hile's poem: he argues that, if writers are to respond meaningfully to 'ecological crisis,' they 'must listen to what is other than human and how it is speaking to us and that the act of attention between self and the environment is intertwined and interdependent and completely mutual' ('The Act of Writing').

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