POETRY AND SACRED PLACES: SOME POETRY FROM WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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I would like to start by reading the poems, some of which I want to discuss. The first is the second to fourth stanzas of Alec Choate's "Spinifex in Flower":[1]

But now, the day's drive over,
and watching the spinifex in moonlight,
I ask myself if I am in a desert.
The flowering stalks, reaching my waist or higher, are upright in the sky-line to sky-line stillness yet pliant enough to make their silver
shimmer, and a lake is born,
too bright to mirror stars
or the moon itself that throws the silver there. There is a shoreline, a belt of dark in rags, and there are islands, dark too, but rising to glint as if they gather spray.

When dawn comes slowly, and a light wind combs the flowering crests,
the silver thins to mist, drifting, loosening, and as the moon, lazing towards
the last darkness of the western skyline, leadens its brilliance,
the shore, the islands, front me for what they are, rock outcrops, dune spines, hills, a stand of trees huddling together like cranky skeletons
or trees still living, but stumbling,
pausing to find their way.

Now, in its turn, what fleetingly is mist withers away as the wind freshens.
The sun splinters its shell at the world's edge and streamerwise fires orange, apricot and gold across the feathery flowers.
The awakened country, every hushed mile, ripens into a wheatfield,
a grower's dream crop, generously grained. its level vastness nodding for harvesting.

The following poems are my own.

The Beach

I have decided
to take the beach
to be the literal speech of God:
every grain of sand
considered
by the wave's mouth, by the lilac face of the sea
that curls against the hard palate of reef, that mumbles in the beard of weed;
that seeks to place
a template of precise speech against the granite breakwall

and fails:

but in slow millennia
achieves
unutterable sighing under moaned gulls
and dumps
the silent vocabulary of the sand
in unpunctuated
dunes.

This
finely polished vocabulary
also touched
the emerald tongue of the sea and glares at
the vain semantics of theology.

Swan Rivergod

A goddess of riverbanks
who piles white sand
slowly between water-edge

and sedge grasses
of various kinds
which she also made

and quietly orchestrates
the lap lap lap of waves

that strike
wood-pleasing melody
along the jetty piles:

her convenient xylophone.

She also sets ringing
the aluminium masts
of yachts at their bell shackles

and sets up correspondences
between waves of water, sound, light
and inaccessible

reaches of the mind.

The Pearl

I am sure the ocean
loves the limestone reef.

I have seen
its night back

flex with minimal effort
and rise over the reef edge

where moments before
they lay side by side

in a night untroubled
by wind or tide.

As if wedded to the reef
its shoulder overshadows.

I have heard its night voice
'Surely coral grows here."

A pearl sails in the sky above.
The ocean reaches for it.

A pearl lies deep beneath the reef:
the ocean rolls through

seagrass
searching.

I shall read and refer to poems by William Hart-Smith, Lee Knowles and Andrew Lansdown, but I wish to refer to them after introducing some theoretical matters by way of reflection on the poems above and on another Choate poem.

Gerd Theissen uses five terms to elaborate the experience of the holy. They are pregnancy, competition, dominance, transparency and ambivalence.[2] These terms are generally straightforward, but "pregnancy" does not mean, in the first place "with child" but something like "pregnant with meaning". It renders the German term *praegnant* – significant, terse, pithy, or something that stands out in its setting and thereby announces a meaning that grabs the perceiver's attention.

I want to use these terms to explore the extent to which poetry can structure or give form to religious experience, as a response to the contents of the sensory or perceptual field generated by the natural world. I attempt this with reference to these poems from Western Australia. I think that a number of writers have responded to a distinctive quality in that landscape. Tim Winton's phrase "that eye the sky" comes to mind.

In exploring a topic in biblical studies, I became interested in Theissen's description of miracle stories as "symbolic actions of human subjectivity in which a revelation of the holy is given shape and empirical

reality transcended". This statement may also be true of some types of poetry, and it is interesting to try to see why. It is also interesting to see whether particular poems can be analysed from the perspective of their conformity to a formal, describable, structure of the holy which otherwise might be assumed but not really noticed.

Pregnancy, dominance, ambivalence, competition, and transparency: the total effect of these terms creates a sense of something that stands out in its environment, perhaps by means of strong contrast. There might be a small, detailed precise object set in the foreground of a large, general but powerful landscape, or a large, impressive object that simply dominates. Anything that the eye lights upon has caught its attention; and some things simply seem to leap out from a generalised background and grab the attention. As Les Murray puts it,

> The ensemble of effects in a poem calls into play our autonomic nervous system, the one we don't consciously control, by bringing about a state of alert in us. This is the state balanced between the urge to fight or flee and the urge to surrender... Everyone has a sacred site somewhere in their life, even if modern language makes them shy about speaking of it readily. This is the place, perhaps having no physical location outside themselves, where awe inheres for them; the commonest Western term for this place is the soul.[3]

Murray's reference to an inner dimension can have a corresponding point in the sensory landscape. The encounter with particular places evokes an "awareness of soul" that we thereby associate with "sacred place". One does not have to go looking for these places or moments, but perhaps just as a photographer trains the eye to see in a compositional way, perhaps the poet as perceiver recognises the type of these experiences and becomes sensitive to their possibility and more able to describe them.

Some things that stand out are so powerful with respect to their background that they tend to overwhelm the perceiver, to dominate and even to crush the psyche. Some settings tantalise or bemuse, leaving the observer with a sense of puzzled inquisitiveness. The poet is not sure where the experience as observed has taken him or her. One is left bemused, provoked or humbled. Here is a short example, referring to Sorrento, a coastal suburb of Perth.

Cessation of Sensory Stimuli

The sea by Sorrento
stuns like acred emeralds
and arrests all motion
as the car speeds down the coastal highway. Through an open window
the apparent motion of the dunes
and the dull green shrubs
stops completely
and the acred emeralds of the sea
take me I know not where.

The palette of the environment can be so rich, so diverse that the perceiver is overwhelmed by possibilities, by the sense that there is more in the field than can be encompassed by his use of words, more there than can be responded to and properly acknowledged. I found a reference to this sense in a work by C. S. Lewis. He wrote:

> We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves – that though we cannot, yet these projections can, enjoy in themselves that beauty, grace and power of which Nature is the image.[4]

I wrote a poem about travelling to Tasmania which explores something like this, where a direct comparison is made between the extraordinary colour of the sea from 30,000 feet and a virtue that informs character.

Flying over Bass Strait down to Hobart

Were the blue
skin of the sea
a virtue
to be acquired, I would
take it in
and make it
unforgotten, The gazing pool
of an inner eye.
The blue expanse of Bass Strait
drifts away
leisurely.

Wind across waves
creases the sea:

a genetic pattern
creases
the back of my hand.
Over St Helens,
silver creeks and streams
glint on and off
like furnace worms
as we pass over to the South.

Competition between sensory claimants for our attention leads on to the related term, transparency. The sum of what can be described tends to "thin out"; yet in so doing, the experience and the poem does not so much vaporise or vanish in the direction of the notional, the conceptual or the directly metaphysical, but may acquire a sense of the mind seeing through the "solidity" of perceivable things to a mysterious framework or void in which they are "set". One almost sees through things to a kind of transcendence which is otherwise not the subject of direct description. The more tangible and tactile and aural and visual the poetic field becomes, the greater the sense of the transparency and even transitoriness of the collective images.

This last point is also true of those short haiku-like poems or sections of poems that evoke the transitorinees of the mind and of life by means of a simple contrasting set of subjects - especially, say, a bird or birds in flight across a sky, or trees or grass moving in the wind. William Hart-Smith's short poem "Sparrow Hawk",[5] set at a particular spot to the West of Perth and near the coast, comes to mind.

High above the screen
of the Lakeway Drive-in at sundown a motionless hawk
is a midge
lodged in the fluid of the sky's bloodshot eye.

Hawks are relatively common in that part of the Perth suburbs. Here is a short poem of my own, independent from the above, set just a couple of kilometres away from the Lakeway Drive-in.

Zen Birds

Birds over the windscreen
are gone almost

before I see them. They leave my semantic net unfired,
tethered
in the slow ground of mind.

I return to the first poem, Choate's "Spinifex in Flower". Choate's poem is highly perceptual, sensory and descriptive. It takes us from night to day, with their related sensory states. It pivots at the shift from night to day, sunrise. Night is dominated by the moon, under which light the desert of spinifex is seen as a lake or inland sea. The scene transforms at sunrise, at which point the lake is seen in a new light as desert. The perceptual intensity is maintained as the language of silver, moonlight, shimmer, glint and mirror is overtaken by the colours of dawn, "streamers of orange and apricot and gold". These colour words stand out in the imagination, and in Theissen's terminology are "praegnant".

Choate does not leave us with this simple contrast and transition from a night-field to a day-field. The eye (or mind) now imposes a final metaphor in which the desert cover of spinifex is seen as a grower's dream crop, a wheatfield ripe for harvest. The poem moves from night to day and from the imagined moonlight lake to a seen desert field of spinifex - which is then perceptually intensified by the imagination into a field of wheat. At the literal level, this is a misreading, but at the symbolic level this expresses the richness and wealth of what he has observed as he watched the desert-field under moonlight and then under the morning's light. What has been seen with the eyes has become food for the soul. There is a faint but real echo of John's Gospel in the reference to "nodding for harvest", where the phrase is used metaphorically of human beings themselves, who are, in this sense, another type of harvest.

Choate has another poem in this collection that illustrates this pattern of the holy. It reminds me of the part in Wordsworth's "Prelude" where the youth rows out onto a lake at night and is terrified by the epiphany of the mountain. Choate's poem is called "Mount Liebig". At this point, I must note that Choate has driven across the Western Australian/Northern Territory border. In this poem a major pairing of opposites and a transition from one state to its converse is also essential to the poem, and indicates

something basic about the sense of sacred place. In "Mount Liebig", the poem moves from daytime observation of a mountain to night time observation of a mountain. As well as "standing out", the perceived mountain generates a mood of intimidation. It dominates in its potency. There is a gender oscillation in the perceptual field as the mountain is now masculine, now feminine, but no less menacing in either guise.

> A mountain deformed among a sprawl of mountains, a welding of huge fists of rock
> or blunt malignant growths,
> it heaves itself up from the desert's crust without one glance of welcome as we drive
> along its amber skirt of desert oaks.
> Cruelly erect, its only mood is force.
> With every mask we try, it stays as brutal. As for the neighbour hills it rises from, it
> stares beyond their insignificance, aloof, a bull brow, big above its herd.
>
> The sun sinks down in blood.
> Our track veers northward, and we swing
> the mountain to our right as lightly as a pebble, and even with more ease rescramble
> its patchwork light and shade to feminine its body, big breasts lolling, thighs
> fattening,
> a sudden mother figure, silent, sullen,
> day's last heat hazing her with sweat
> until she lifts her head
> and squares her shoulders to the stars
> which like a swarm of fireflies nettle her.
>
> The more we drive from her the more she rise, meaning to trail us to our camp
> and brood all night above us, bulk our sleep.

This poem displays the fivefold motifs of the structure of the holy. The mountain does not simply stand-out in its setting; its ambivalence of gender sets up a duality embracing male and female intensifications. In the first stanza, the mountain is male. It is emblematic of a raw father figure, a brute maleness behind and above, creative in its paternal distance. It is brutish with its "huge fists of rock". It is "deformed", "welded", and covered with "malignant growths". It is phallic. It "heaves itself up" and is "crudely erect"; and the observer, arrested by its compelling force, cannot cause it to offer a benign face no matter how much imaginative effort is made. It remains a "bull brow, big above its herd". For all and in all its massive solidity, this mountain is transparent of psychic or spiritual forces greater than it. Whether these are properly confined to the domain of the poet's psyche, the imaginative resources of his own identity writ large, or whether

they are truly projected into the mystery that accounts for existence, is not addressed by the poet.

The poem polarises in its centre when the word "blood" is introduced. It is the blood of sunset, but blood that can evoke male or female. The mountain switches perceived gender suddenly. It is feminised, becoming a "mother figure". She is however a gigantic figure, an earth-mother of intensified features with the power of "squared shoulders that confront the stars". In comparison, the stars themselves are mere insects, "fireflies" that nettle - perhaps as minor irritants, or as a decorative hair-piece.

For all that, the mountain has not become benignly female, a "dolly bird". She remains mother formidable, "silent and sullen". Perhaps a mother who may kill or injure to preserve or save some of her brood. She "trails" the travellers to their camp and will "brood above them" all night. One could turn to Camille Paglia to find more vocabulary suitable for use here.[6] The poem also creates a reflective balance between these male and female intensifications. The mountain is not perceived as more one than the other, but as moving between states with the passage from day to night, a passage that can be repeated endlessly. This balance between the two states invites reflection from the reader.

This poem leaves us with the rumour or the image of a half-formed god; a creature from a white-man's dreaming. The mountain, standing out in the perceptual field, competed almost actively with all other objects for the poet's eye, and won. Having competed, it dominates and compels. It overwhelms his sense of all else, and at the same time invites and repels. It fascinates the poet, and elicits lyrical description, but tinged with a desire to keep one's distance, not to trespass on the sacred earth. There is a sense that the mountain could strike and kill. The mountain also sets up a gender oscillation about the deepest forces of male and female sexuality, and in which the threat of violence and death are present. It would be a small step for the poet to step over the boundary of "response to the natural order" into a realm of purely religious response. But it is this resource in the landscape that gives the poem its force and which feeds and nurtures the reader's own imagination.

It may well be that the formally religious reader can use this poem, and others like it, as the verbal ikonostasis that invites the direct approach to the transcendent in the transition to adoration of an unseeable God.

(I have tried to follow that transition a little more formally in my poem "The Beach", where the sensory confluence of sandhills meeting the Indian Ocean near Perth becomes a visual type of the ecstatic utterance referred to by St Paul - and as expressed in the notion of every grain of sand being a word of God, a unit of speech or meaning in a composition beyond rational expression, a speech that is objectively material and sensual, and even terrifyingly and inexpressibly beautiful. There is a resonance with a Blake image here, too.)

The anthropomorphic construction of Choate's mountain as intensified masculinity and intensified femininity expresses a movement of the human mind that in another culture would have created completely a god or spirit of the mountain. In the poem, these drives are contained within the realm of affective image and metaphor. The experience conveyed remains objective and powerful.

The poem leaves the question of engaging the forces and drives within the human perceiver, as engaged and expressed by the poet, and asking both psychological and the metaphysical questions. The source of the anthropomorphisms can be limited to the perceiving, vulnerable human. The forces personified and perceived in the mountain are then really intensified projections, longings, desires, emotional forces of the human subject, layers of consciousness and nothing more.

But the metaphysician in us can push the question beyond the realm of experience. The question is kept open of a transcendent and creative source for both "mountain as extra-mental object" and the perceiving human who is "poet speaking the word". We tend to find reflection on this among the philosophers of religion rather than the poets. Thus Eric Mascall wrote:

> It is certainly possible for the mind to grasp both the contingency of the material object of perception and the necessity of its ground in one mental act, a continuation of God-and-the-world-in-the-cosmological-relation.[7]

The poet William Hart-Smith lived in Australia between 1936 and 1946 and from 1962 until 1978. During that time he twice lived in Western Australia, the second time from the late 1960's until 1978.[8] I would like to read some of his poems that express this perceptual attentiveness to which Theissen's five-fold terminology can be applied.

Syllable Count Poem 2 (1976)

Here on the side of a hill
stand still, quite still and listen,
will you – listen, to the sound
of the drops of rain that fall
on to the ground, behind you
and all around, on the face
and hands – drops garnered, gathered
by the surface of the leaves
of sapling and shrub and those
with lofty crown out of sight
from a drift of cotton wool
mist, to form full round heavy
drops that fall from the tips of
scimitar leaves.

Watercolour (1976)

The stillness is full of menace and foreboding. It is hard to say whether it is thunder one hears or the rumble of car wheels approaching
over the wooden bridge.

The sky behind the river-gums
is a wall, a screen
a perpendicular barrier, blue-black.

A long late sun
cannot penetrate the barrier,
the light hits the white trunks of the trees and bounces back.

The shapes of the trunks are frozen lightning which blazes on the black screen.

The green of the leaves of the river-gums is incredibly intensified: it burns.

And the cockatoos that swarm, and scream insanely as the storm approaches, cannot bear the intensity of their own whiteness.

The poems "Kellerberrin 6410" (1975), "Jellyfish" (1976), and "Billyo Boy" (Hand to Hand, 1980) could also be looked at and introduce a more human element into the landscape. "Kellerberrin" and "Billy Boy" give a

"vacant" sense of the human in a place. The soul in the foreground stands in sensory contrast with the evacuated townscape.

Kellerberrin 6410

Where civilisation is a remote
glint of roofshine
in one vaste sea of wheat.

Civilisation is a house
sixteen miles as the road runs
out of town as the crow cries
as the black and white magpies
yodel in the afternoon.

I conclude with a poem by Lee Knowles that refers to the town of Esperance, in the far south-east coast of Western Australia; and with part of a poem by Andrew Lansdown.

Esperance Nights[9]

1
Out there
voices stretch,
islands join sky.

On such a night
things surface –
dolphins, turtles, squid, a whirr of flying fish.
A light leaps offshore.

2
These wind
threatens the town, hissing.

Waves approach in lines.
Wind rides the shore, lifts sand, grass. Tomorrow
night is our last.

We turn in our bed,
hearing the insistent wind, the sea's long march.

3
Our window
opposes the seafront.
Leave it open once
and the whole sea
will jump its dunes and come in.
Must love end this way
in a watery blaze?
Is this how it is?

There are whole armies

outside.

A Good Night[10]

The mulies are in the harbour,
shoals of them, teeming unseen
in the opaque sea...

the mulies, the bait-fish, swirl
like long-bodied moths. At a command,
the men hoist the net. It is a crucible

bubbling with molten silver.
Poured out, the fish separate
into small, oblong ingots...

...But the fish
are not ready. Frenzied,

they flick and twist, scales flying off
like sequins from a silver purse.
Their gills gape, the red frills

clogged by air...

In a child's hand, a line twitches
like a caught nerve. In the crates,
the fish have gone off the boil

and lay eternally still. The men
lower the net again. "Gonna be a good
night," smiles one man, his hair

spangled with scales, like confetti.

There are many differences between Lansdown's poem and Choate's "Mount Liebig". Curiously, they conclude with a strangely overlapping image. The fishermen, who in capturing the fish, must kill, are imaged with "scales like confetti" in their hair. The world of weddings is introduced. There is at once a feminine reference and the overlay to the death of the fish conveys just a hint of death that may lurk in marriage. The mountain was left with stars nettled in its hair – cosmic confetti if you like.

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[3] L. Murray, "Poems and the Mystery of Embodiment", *A Working Forest* (Duffy & Snellgrove 1997), pp. 387 and 395.
[4] Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and other Addresses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973 [1949]) pp. 12-13.

[5] *Selected Poems 1936-1984.*
[6] See her *Sexual Personae: Art and Culture from Nefertiti to Emily Dickenson.*
[7] E. Mascall, *The Openness of Being: Natural Theology Today* (London; Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971) pp. 110-111.
[8] See William Hart-Smith, *Hand to Hand: A Garnering With Uncollected Poems and Essays on his Life and Work* (Barbara Petrie, ed. NSW: Butterfly Books 1991), pp. x-xi.
[9] *Dial Marina* (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1986).
[10] Andrew Lansdown, *Abiding Things: Poems, Stories, Essays* (Albury: Studio, 1996).