

Poetry as Investigative Pedagogy: Issues of Ethics and Praxis in Hay and Thorne's *Last Days of the Mill*

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Abstract

This paper examines dilemmas of ethics and practice in the author's co-written *Last Days of the Mill* (2012). The usefulness of poetry as a tool of social inquiry is considered, both in the immediate context of a dying pulp mill in an industrial town in northern Tasmania, and the wider symbolic import of the mill's demise within an island wedded to an unrealisable vision of industrial greatness. It is argued that there are forms of knowing in which poetry is far more efficacious than analytical prose, most notably elusive and grounded understandings such as 'being there-ness', and the accretion of a vividly storied mindscape expressed through the spoken word. The paper then considers the injunction of the Canadian poet, Robert Bringham: 'when he sees his people destroying the world, the poet can say, "we're destroying the world". He can say it in narrative or lyric or dramatic or meditative form, tragic or ironic form, short or long form . . . But he cannot lie, as a poet . . .' (44). The paper argues for a more nuanced and inclusivist ethic, even when, technically speaking, this requires an act of dissimulation on the part of the poet.

Introduction

In 2012, working collaboratively with a visual artist, I published a series of monologues (with my collaborator's artworks) in a book entitled *Last Days of the Mill*. The monologues/narrative poems were based upon a series of interviews with former mill floor workers from a recently decommissioned pulp mill in Burnie, an industrial town on Tasmania's north-west coast. An island that has provided evolutionary nurturance for remarkable species assemblages, Tasmania sits like an inverted teardrop off the easternmost coast of Australia. I am accustomed to calling it 'the island at the end of the earth', for its first southerly landfall is the Antarctic ice, and its nearest westerly landfall is the coast of Argentina, two-thirds of the planet away. Somewhat incongruously, this wild island has long nurtured a hegemonic dreaming in which the island at the end of the earth is transformed into a throbbing industrial powerhouse. That the island's dreaming was tragic folly did not compromise the strength of the narrative's hold on the hearts and minds of Tasmanians, and whilst its hegemonic status has crumbled, there are large numbers of Tasmanians who adhere to it still.

The now-defunct pulp mill was the single most powerful symbol of the island's industrial yearning. Its demise constituted a crisis of faith in Tasmanians' most basic understandings of themselves. The mill workers whose stories form the basis of my monologues/vernacular poems in *Last Days of the Mill* were tenaciously enmeshed within the industrial worldview and its values. For them, the passing of the mill was a

tragedy of unsurpassed portent, in terms of both its wider symbolic import, and in the immediate terms of what it presaged for their own, the town's—and the island's—future.

This was not, and is not, my own position. The island's industrial dreaming was as wrong-headed as it was heroic, and the pulp mill itself was an environmental monstrosity—the planet can breathe a little easier for its passing. With the crumbling of the hegemonic vision of an island of smokestacks, slurry, and tailings dams, a lighter, more other-regarding dreaming is possible, one that complements the extraordinary beauty, fecundity and evolutionary pizzazz of the island. And the town of Burnie can, one hopes, develop civic capacities, and imagine a different local future.

This paper interrogates my project. It was, from the start, approached as an investigative project somewhere in the pedagogical terrain of sociology and cultural geography (Ward). It posed, and still poses, important questions of research praxis and ethics, and each of these dimensions is explored here.

First, the project deployed poetry as its form of reportage. Much has been written about poetry as community development, as activism, as a means of self-actualisation, and as a process of place-making (for example, Burnside; Gibbins; Lorimer). Its deployment as an ethnographic tool within qualitative research has also attracted attention, and 'Poetic Inquiry' is becoming an increasingly prominent sub-field within narrative research (Predegast, Leggo and Sameshima; Thomas, Cole and Stewart). My project was situated—though not conventionally—within this epistemological paradigm. What truth claims, then, are embodied in my first-person, poetic monologues, and what status can I claim for them? In explication of the shifting sands of an island's basic understandings of itself, where do these monologues sit? This paper considers these questions.

One voice that has long been raised for poetry (and the literary arts generally) as a mode of seeing of great relevance to public discourse and the understanding of justice claims within public discourse is that of the philosopher, Martha Nussbaum. Whereas politics and the law, she writes, deal in 'an abstract and pseudomathematical vision of human beings', poetry provides 'a rich and concrete vision that does justice to human lives' (81). We might extend this observation to non-human beings, too; it is, indeed, a core assumption within ecocriticism. Poetry, then, is an undertaking that is saddled with responsibilities that are profoundly ethical in nature. The Canadian poet, Robert Bringhurst, is brutal in his view of it. In his essay, 'The Persistence of Poetry and the Destruction of the World', he writes: 'when he sees his people destroying the world, the poet can say, "we're destroying the world". He can say it in narrative or lyric or dramatic or meditative form, tragic or ironic form, short or long form . . . But he cannot lie, as a poet . . .' (44). My mill worker monologues, though, are written in the first person, and take the perspective of those workers—that the passing of the environmental monstrosity that was the mill is a *bad* thing, and so is the crumbling of the old hegemonic reverie of hyper-industrialisation. But this is not my own position, remember, and in writing these monologues I would seem to have transgressed Bringhurst's emphatic dictum—in suggesting, via the mill workers' voices, that the closure of the mill is a tragedy, I appear to betray my own view that, in truth, it is better that the mill be gone. A poet, lying. The final section of the paper explores this dilemma.

The Project and the Book

In 2010, in the small industrial city of Burnie, an old and decrepit pulp mill followed the familiar post-industrial trajectory and closed its gates forever. It had endured for over 70 years (flourishing, indeed, through its first 25 years), and at the time of its closure was owned by Amcor, operating then with a staff that was a fraction of the total workforce employed during its heyday in the 1960s.

For the first 40 years of its life the mill was run by Associated Pulp and Paper Mills Ltd (APPM). APPM's largely English management was paternalistic and progressive, setting in place generous housing, health, recreational and welfare schemes, and always carrying a much larger workforce than economic prudence should have mandated. The mill culture was familial—people spoke, indeed of 'the mill family'—and, predictably under such circumstances, there was little industrial unrest and unions kept a low profile.

All changed in 1980 when the mill was bought by a mining company, North Broken Hill (NBH). NBH was in process of becoming a significant force within the forest industries (Jamieson 173), and brought with it an aggressively anti-union culture, one in which the old APPM's pronounced sense of social responsibility had no place. A decade of industrial turmoil followed, culminating in an extraordinary confrontation in 1992, one which had national implications, being part, seemingly, of a systematic campaign involving certain large and powerful companies and the anti-union organisation, the H.R. Nicholls Society, to eradicate trade unionism, not just in a single industrial context, but as a very institution. The Burnie dispute was thus a component within a larger pattern, but a particularly dramatic and prominent component, and it dominated the national media for the duration of its protracted course.

Workers and management fought each other to a standstill, and permanent closure at this time was a real possibility. Instead the mill changed hands again, to Amcor for \$415 million, though NBH retained its other involvements in Tasmanian forestry, 'which were principally devoted to woodchip exports and plantation establishment' (Jamieson 223). Under Amcor the mill rapidly downsized whilst simultaneously modernising—but to no avail. When it closed in 2010 it had a work complement of 300, a far cry from the 3000 who had walked through the gates in 1969, and in the 1990s Burnie shed a fifth of its population (though much of this was recovered in the noughties).

I grew up in nearby Wynyard, a smaller town than Burnie, and intertown rivalry, particularly on the sporting field, was fierce. I now appreciate that 'The Pulp' (as the Burnie mill was colloquially known) was the main employer for my home town, too. I wanted to know what the mill's closure meant, then, not just for Burnie, but for 'The Coast' (another pervasive colloquialism) more generally, and so, with sponsorship from Burnie City Council and the Cradle Coast campus of University of Tasmania, I arrived, recorder in hand, and set about interviewing everyone in sight. I wanted to know if and how a company town, low on civic capacities, could survive the departure of the mill that had been the town's all—whether it could rapidly invigorate those underdeveloped civic capacities, whether it could imagine an alternative future, and whether it could take effective steps towards implementing any such new-minted vision. I expected to write a prose account of my findings, but increasingly the voices of the mill workers

themselves claimed my fascination, and I wanted to give voice to their voice. I decided to write something akin to, but perhaps not quite, poetry.

Around this time I learned of Tony Thorne, an animator of some national prominence, and also an expat from The Coast who had been drawn to return. Tony was there before me. He was allowed on site for the last week of The Pulp's operation, where he was struck by the cavernous emptiness of the vast buildings, within which were just a few remaining workers, and most of these sitting at computer screens in glass booths. I enlisted Tony as one of my many interview subjects, and the synergy was such that we decided to pool our projects. I produced ten 'dramatic monologues' in an amalgam of mill worker voices, and Tony produced a series of waterwash sketches and digital prints made from his photos. Art-with-supporting-text exhibitions at the Burnie Regional Art Gallery and the Moonah Art Centre (in Hobart) ensued, and these were followed by the book, *Last Days of the Mill*, in which the monologues and art works were juxtaposed. *Last Days of the Mill* was subsequently shortlisted for the 2013 Tasmanian Book Prize, and took out the People's Choice Award.

Identifying More-than-Poetry Dimensions of *Last Days of the Mill*

Why did I opt for poetry—a poetry of sorts—as my chosen medium for representation of the stories of the mill's closure and of the lives of those who worked therein? As noted above, my original intention was to write in prose. *Last Days of the Mill* is history, social commentary, biography. It is not poetry for its own sake—indeed, I have never been much interested in poetics. Poetry has always been, for me, a medium for the communication of ideas and insights beyond poetry—a mode of writing as inquiry. When poetry suits this communicative purpose, I have used it; when it seems less well suited than prose, I have not used it.

There is, as also noted above, an entire sub-discipline loosely labelled 'Poetic Inquiry', which champions the use of poetry as academic epistemology. For those of us who flirt around the fringes of Goethean phenomenology, this has immediate attraction. I am much taken with Laurel Richardson's position:

I do not contend that poetic representation is the only or even the best way to represent all social research knowledge. But I do claim (a) that for some kinds of knowledge, poetic representation may be preferable to representation in prose, and (b) that poetic representation is a viable method for seeing beyond social scientific conventions and discursive practices, and therefore should be of interest to those concerned with epistemological issues and challenges. (877)

I wrote the monologues for *Last Days of the Mill* in this spirit—one of inquiry into a time- and place-specific social phenomenon, though one with, nevertheless, considerably wider import, and this was prior to any concern for poetics as such. My ambitions stopped short of any sort of academic representation, but poetry as social inquiry the project most certainly was. What sort of history, of social critique, did I produce? Nothing forensic; rigorously analytical. I sought to proceed by way of *exemplification* rather than argument, to *convey* the culture of the mill floor through the language of its people rather than describe it, to give merely a *sense* of work practices. That word 'merely' seems apologetic, to be deprecatory of the project, but I do not

mean it to be. It is precisely for its capacity for suggestiveness, for capturing flavours and sensations, that I chose poetry over prose as my expressive medium. Flavours, sensations, ‘being there-ness’, the accretion of a vividly storied mindscape expressed through the spoken word—these are the modes of knowing in which poetry comprehensively trumps analytical prose, even when the intent of the writing is to wing out from the specific to broader abstractions obtainable from the phenomenon under consideration. So it was that I abandoned my original prosaic intention in favour of poetry.

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The closure of the Burnie mill can be portrayed as yet another ‘old economy’ enterprise swept away by technological change and the capricious flows of global capital (for example, Ruth Barton, below), but it is both this and more, for it is the demise of the mill that is most potently emblematic of Tasmania’s shift from an obsolete political economy to something distinctively new, the contours of which are still not firmly established. As I have written elsewhere:

The great Tasmanian dreaming, tracing back to the first decades of the twentieth century, was one in which the island at the end of the earth would become a throbbing, roaring engine of heavy industry, an island of clamour and smokestacks, the Ruhr Valley of the southern seas, all made possible through the medium of endless, cheap hydro power. It was a heroic aspiration, eventually realised only in part, and best viewed in the context of its tangible emblems – the mines of the West Coast, the smelters on the Tamar River, the textile mills in Launceston, the zinc works on the Derwent, and two pulp mills, one at either end of the island. Among these, the promise and ultimate shortcomings of the great dreaming were most potently embodied in the pulp mill at Burnie, and nothing is more dramatically symbolic of the rift between Tasmania’s old industrial economy and the island’s emergence into a post-industrial world than the closing of ‘The Pulp’. (Hay, ‘Soapbox’)

This heroic industrial dreaming was hegemonic and politically bipartisan, a submerged article of faith that floated below scrutiny and dispute. When the irresistible tides of globalisation arrived on the island, most Tasmanians were unprepared. This was certainly so in Burnie, where many, the displaced mill workers prominent among them, saw (and see) only disaster in the closing of the mill:

Anyway, th old mill’s history now,
and th Coast’s stuffed in my book.
Have t’get a big employer frm somewhere
or pretty soon we’ll be bloody Detroit all over.
Th main industry’ll be th welfare –
might be already.
I’m glad I’m near th end’f me workin life,
I cn tell y’ that fr nothin.
(from ‘Money for Old Rope’, Hay and Thorne 38-9)

Others, though, see the closure of the mill as liberatory, an unlocking of the town’s dormant potential. In this duality, Burnie symbolises the larger island. The old dreaming

has run its course, and the form of the future is still to assume clear shape. It is true that Burnie has done it tough since the mill's closure, as it had done it tough in the 20 years of downsizing before that. Ruth Barton has observed that 'high levels of unemployment, low levels of labour market participation and high levels of disadvantage' (150) persist. The old hegemonic aspiration remains tenacious because the nature and efficacy of the economic models that will replace what has gone remain unclear.

These larger context tides of change lodge in the interstices of the poems in *Last Days of the Mill*. But poetry as a medium of overarching critique is less well established than its deployment at the level of interpersonal converse. Citing the oral historian, Dennis Tedlock, Richardson presciently observes that: 'when people talk, whether as conversants, storytellers, informants, or interviewees, their speech is closer to poetry than prose. Nobody talks in prose. For example, everybody . . . adults and children, male and female, speaks using a poetic device, the pause . . .' (879).

So it is with *Last Days of the Mill*. The inquisitorial components of the project are not purely, nor even primarily, to do with grand questions of socio-economic change. Thorne and I hold the view that the post-mill future is likely, in due course, to be preferable to what has now gone, but, as I have written, 'there will be losers, people whose skills and values were honed within the economy that is passing, and who lack the resilience to make the necessary transition' (Hay, 'Soapbox'). Much of its former workforce sees, in the mill's closure, a dismissal of the validity of their skills and values. Our confidence in the long-term post-mill future is understandably not shared by most of the old mill workers, then—nevertheless, we hold the view that their work practices, skills and beliefs merit validation. The floor of 'The Pulp' had a rich and unique culture, with many work practices specific to the mill. It generated an endless trove of story. It even generated idiomatic usages specific to that one workplace. The mill workers, I have written, 'were skilled communicators, their vocabularies large and vividly deployed, their recourse to metaphor and simile marvellously inventive. They are natural-born poets', such that I deemed 'my' monologues "'found" poems in large part, and in their construction I am an arranger and editor as much as a creator' (Hay, 'Poems' 98). Here is a sample from the monologue, 'Poke a Stick at', a union activist's story of the beginning of the 1992 strike:

We thought, well how do y'go about a picket?
We went home and loaded up th old Kinswood ute
and we chucked th fucken 44-gallon drum in th back fr heatin,
and Pablo's missus, she painted her up with 'Viva'
and all these fucken freedom-type slogans all over her.
So that was our battle wagon we went with. (Hay and Thorne 14)

Tony and I determined that these working lives should not be allowed to vanish into the recesses of aging memories, thence into oblivion. The workers of the Burnie mill lived at the heart of the dreaming that went unchallenged in the island for very many decades. They were proud and dignified people. Their stories, their unique way of being Tasmanian, needed, we thought, to be honoured, and that is what we set out to do. As Tony observed:

While I drew, many workers came to tell me stories of their life at the Mill. I felt the pride in their work and their sense of loss at the closure. They seemed glad

that someone was there trying to record this final separation . . . The Mill became quieter, the smells changed, the spaces grew cold . . . As I walked out one night with the site coordinator, he touched a roll of paper and said, ‘The best printer paper in the world’. (Thorne, 102)

In my case, I strove to convey the vernacular flavour of life on the mill floor, to valorise a working culture with unique folkways, memories, and cadences and usages of speech (on this, see Gibbins). Richardson would, I think, approve: ‘poetic representation’, she writes, ‘offers social researchers an opportunity to write about, or with, people in ways that honour their speech styles, words, rhythms, and syntax’ (880).

I think I have succeeded. I have been true, I think, to Nussbaum’s observation that poetry provides ‘a rich and concrete vision that does justice to human lives’ (81). The book has been widely read within Tasmania, and has received official accolades there. Though its penetration beyond Tasmania has been minimal, this, I think, is of little import. It successfully represented a place that was undergoing a crisis of community development (the small Tasmanian city of Burnie), its symbolic context (Tasmania), and the passing of its most salient feature (‘The Pulp’).

Considering Ethical Intractability

The smug tone with which the previous sub-section concluded will not be lost on the reader. It is a self-satisfaction that is in no wise warranted, for Bringhurst’s ethic still hovers in the wings: ‘when he sees his people destroying the world’ the poet’s obligation is to speak truth; ‘he cannot lie, as a poet’ (44). There is no avoiding the observation that ‘The Pulp’ was an environmental disaster, in its immediate site impact, in its impact on the town, and in terms of its wider resource draw-down. But, as I have noted in the paper’s Introduction, I wrote my monologues in the first-person voices of the mill workers, for most of whom the closure of the mill constitutes an economic, social and often personal tragedy. Even the heat, danger and stench in which they were required to work was seen as symbolically positive—an affirmation of job security, and a source of pride in the contribution their labours were making to the nation’s prosperity. For the reader of *Last Days of the Mill* their voices will be seen as my voice. Have I not, then, transgressed Bringhurst’s stern and uncompromising dictum? For, one monologue possibly excepted, I have elided my own conviction that ‘my’ people were participating in the impoverishment, if not the actual destruction, of the world.

It cannot be argued away—as it stands, Bringhurst’s injunction has me dead to rights. My response is to insist that the dictum itself is insufficiently nuanced. For reasons already adduced, I would insist that the more ethical position is to acknowledge the dignity and worth of the lives of the mill workers (and other victims of globalisation’s train wreck) as they lived lives of decency and purpose in a workplace of toxic carcinogens, producing a product made from a natural resource that was harvested at an unsustainable rate and that, through replacement monocultures, was obliterating species diversity on a large scale.

I have welcomed the end of my island’s industrial dreaming, as emblemised in ‘The Pulp’. It was a drear vision only made possible by our massive dislocation from place, the emanation of a culture still alien to the island. We have gotten past that, and there

is space now to construct new dreams. The choices are not only smokestack industrialisation on one hand, and on the other, co-option into global structures that would destroy the island's culture, economy and natural assets at a whim—a whim over which islanders would have no control.

In my interviews with the citizens of Burnie I found, beyond the displaced mill workers, a confidence in the future; a willingness to dream those new dreams. Such confidence will be sorely tested—it is right now, as we have seen, as Burnie struggles to break out of persistent economic and social malaise. Barton takes the view that the closure of the mill saw the initial sense of regret evolve into a vague and unacknowledged shame: 'there is a sense of ambivalence about The Pulp with recollections about industrial pollution and diseases . . .' (166). She notes the haste with which the site was cleared, its great echoing buildings razed in 2012 to make way for a Bunnings warehouse. Only the site offices, art deco in design and with heritage listing, were suffered to remain. In the months following the mill's closure there was much discussion of what should be done with the site, though there was curiously little support for any option that involved retention of the buildings—indeed, a concrete proposal along these lines from the Queen Victoria Museum in Launceston was quickly sent packing.

The town's attitude to its industrial past is, I think, more complex than this. As the mill passed into history, a determination to construct a future in line with the past was clearly in evidence. The industrial legacy was celebrated in the concept behind, and the emphatic architecture, of the 'Makers' Workshop', set up to honour the past and construct a communal self-image as a place built around practical achievement. The \$12,000 Burnie Print Prize, a prominent national art prize, is also intended to homage the pivotal role of paper in the city's history.

The evidence is mixed, then, and this is probably because there are cross-currents running through the town itself. Certainly the haste with which the mill buildings were so comprehensively obliterated would seem contrary to other expressions of a desire to keep the legacy of the industrial past front and square in the community's construction of its future. It could be argued, too, that Barton is insufficiently alive to options other than the 'either' of globalisation or the 'or' of continuance of assembly-line industry. Nevertheless, it is difficult to disagree with Barton's lamentation for the loss of memory as it lodged within the very fabric of the buildings: 'the mill buildings and their representations of collectivist, blue-collar work and trade union history', she writes, 'can be demolished and Burnie can become a place without a past' (166). The mill, take it for what it was, dominated the town and region for over two-thirds of a century. In the confusion of meanings that must be negotiated as the city forges its post-mill identity the mill workers' legacy should not be diminished through an act of denial, but merge with an evolving future and take its due position in the construction of new place meanings.

Conclusion

I would say to Bringhurst, then, that a poet must certainly state, with as much force, as uncompromisingly, as her/his craft can muster, that the acts of people are destroying the earth. But I would say, too, that the poet must look behind as well as ahead, and look with compassion upon those shunted aside by the uncaring juggernaut of globally-

mandated change. A poet's oeuvre must be inclusive—it must pay respectful homage to those against whom he or she might once have contended.

I doubt, though, that Bringhurst would be much perturbed by the other key finding of this paper: that there are expressive qualities within poetry that can produce dimensions of knowledge likely to elude more usual modes of writing, of inquiry. More specifically, poetry enables a richer and more profound expression of human experience and emotional engagement. It can help preserve rich veins of memory, memory at its most immediate, memory otherwise at risk of obliteration. And it can provide a path to new meanings, new futures.

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