Country Escaping Line in the Poetry of Philip Hodgins

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This essay is based on a presentation that I gave on a panel with two other speakers. One, Bonny Cassidy, spoke about the late Jennifer Rankin; the other, Michael Farrell, spoke about the late John Anderson. Together Cassidy, Farrell and I wanted to dwell on some of the intriguing relationships between these three poets. Superficially there were good reasons for including Hodgins in, and also for excluding Hodgins from, this group. Like Rankin and Anderson, Hodgins died early because of cancer but, perhaps even more than the other two poets, his poetry had a profound impact on a relatively large reading public during his lifetime. Like the other two poets again, part of this impact was due to the originality of what he called his 'landspeak,' or the ways that his poetry seemed to be as much from antipodean interpretations of 'the land' as it was from European and/or North American poetic traditions. While it isn't within the ambition of this essay to elucidate in detail the features of Anderson and Rankin, something of what interested Cassidy, Farrell and me about these three poets is what Martin Harrison would call their distinctive emphasis 'on an architecture of sight and seeing' which 'marks a genuine cultural divide' between Australian and other English-language poetries:

> Recent Australian poetry often stresses the newness of how a supposedly 'strange' desertic or arid landscape is describable, or draws attention to the relative newness of typically Australian senses of placement. The issue, in other words, is less about the ego—the presence of the democratic self amid the landscape—than about cultural perception and, arguably, cultural originality. This difference in sensibility is usually expressed in a deeply conscious attention to the visual behaviour of things or the visual images of humans in landscape. ('Degradation' 126)

Anderson, Hodgins and Rankin each demonstrates quite poignantly this descriptive 'newness,' particularly due to the frequent elision of the 'democratic self' in favour of an attention to 'the visual behaviour of things' in Australian landscapes.

The superficial, but good, reason for *not* including Hodgins in this trio, however, was that his work is by far the least inventive formally, and by far the most conservative epistemologically and politically. Hodgins, we could say, tends to summarise or make simple, while Anderson and Rankin tend to expand, or to make open. As Andrew Taylor has noted, the 'mythic . . . dimension is almost totally absent from Hodgins's landscape . . . [he] favours routine activity and typical experience' (113). We would be hard-pressed to make such claims about poets like Rankin or Anderson. Rankin, for example, can represent 'the sheer multiplicity of experience' (Cassidy 96), while Anderson often 'moves between micro and macro views, stressing interrelation' between objects as disparate as lizards and galactic spirals (O'Keefe 5). But, as I said above, I think this is a largely superficial, though not invalid, distinction. Poems always escape the control of their poets; it is the way that Hodgins's poetry *escapes* him, I will suggest here, that makes it so interesting.

In the same essay from which I quoted above, Harrison points to Hodgins's 'A Note from Mindi Station'[1] as exemplary of a 'poetry closely identified with land and with country' ('Degradation' 129):

> The isolation seemed so reasonable:
> three days of stasis on a broken radio track
> with big cogs grinding in low ratio,
> a survey map to make it possible,
> strong ancient landspeak on the radio
> and unexpected camels staring back.
>
> Since then the North Cottage has been a base,
> a kind of focus in this blur of scrub.
> It's near a dried-up section of the creek
> about five miles from where the homestead is.
> Their daughter brings supplies out once a week
> and talks about some things she can't describe . . .
> (Hodgins 129)

The poem typifies a certain 'photographic isolatedness' for Harrison, which both frames the unique quality of the moment and then suggests that something else lies beyond its edges. He also points out the oddly stabilised relationship between the speaker and the environment of the poem: rather than providing 'disjunctive, shock-filled images' reminiscent of human cognition, 'Mindi Station' proposes an 'unwavering state of mind':

> Each image contributes to the singular direction of meaning and intention which the discourse carries. Image is, in other words, absorbed by thought; vision leads back to discourse, so that ultimately nothing extraneous or vagabond can disrupt the carefully formalised play-off between thought and emptiness . . .
> ('Degradation' 128)

The result is that the environment of the poem 'is offered in ideal fashion, without equivocation, without a sense of searching for how to account for it—and only from the vantage point of the speaker' ('Degradation' 129). This is the narrow epistemological structure of much of Hodgins's poetry, where 'the understanding of reality is disclosed principally "through the power of a subject"' (Charles Taylor, in Harrison 129).

What Harrison so brilliantly elucidates here is the startling fixity of Hodgins's 'geometrically constructed' scenes ('Degradation' 128)—'startling' because of the way that the concrete presence of the language itself, that 'singular direction of thought and meaning,' takes place amidst so much that is *un*-thought, that is *pre*-linguistic. In the case of 'Mindi Station,' this is signalled by the arrival of the daughter at the end of the second stanza (above). She functions as an opening towards an elsewhere that extends beyond the reach of the poem. Of the sky— 'its depth, its range, its overwhelming scale'—she says that '[i]t has a presence she can't explain— / not what it is, but what it might imply.' The *implication* is key here: the tension of the Hodgins poem comes from the fact that the language rests on the potential of what it does not say. Such potentiality becomes central to the rest of 'Mindi Station': the daughter loves to watch 'tiny jets' as they track the sky 'and wonder where they might be headed for.' Crucially, the jets are only half-'there,' in that they have form, but are apparently empty of texture or content: 'you can just make out their shape / but nothing of the isolated roar. /

They're silent as a particle of dust.' Indeed, the trickle of slippage, from a concrete world into the potential worlds it might become, seems to have developed into a torrent by the poem's final line, when 'one small bird' becomes the only thing 'fixed in place,' a 'pivot' for a world that is otherwise swirling 'into a blur.'

This final image rests in perfectly balanced counterpoint to the matter-of-fact geometry of the poem's first stanzas, however. That is, the poem does not pursue the vectors of these open ends, but rather gestures to them in order to arrange a particular aesthetic order of equally proportioned opposites. It happens elsewhere, too: in 'The Land Itself,' for example, the unyielding first line, 'Beyond all arguments there is the land itself' is counterpoised by the suggestion of incertitude in the closing lines. As in 'Mindi Station,' the opacity comes with the introduction of a female figure—this time a geologist—who, looking 'back and forth' between 'the land itself' and 'a computer screen of numbers,' realises that '[s]omething here is unrealised' (Hodgins 189). In its precision, his poetry lies far from the seemingly endless layers of imaginative notation of Anderson's *the forest set out like the night*, or the expansion of the present moment in a poem like Rankin's 'Old Currawong.' At the same time, however, it is also here that we find what draws Hodgins into relation with poets like Anderson and Rankin: the open field, however much the speaker might belie it, provides the poetry with its weight. After all, what do we assume about Philip Hodgins? That his work's simple, perhaps, or that we can 'see' it quite clearly: his language hardly ever assumes prominence over its referents; any ambiguity doesn't result from visual obscurity, but more likely from the alarming clarity of vision itself. In this way, we might also feel that his poems establish great open spaces void of all but some dispersed objects, a rural, Australian idiom and a suspicion that—beyond this parched miscellany—there is nothing. And this, too, is the very power of his work: that it rests, quite clearly, on less than half of the page and on the thinnest fringes of space. A Hodgins poem is very literally an actualised cusp of a far larger virtual region.

Here, the 'virtual' is pure intensity with indeterminate spatiality; in Brian Massumi's words it is 'the future-past of all actuality, the pool of potential from which universal history draws its choices and to which it returns the states it renounces' (66). As it assumes an actualised arrangement on the page, the apparent clarity and stoicism of the Hodgins poem belies what is really a quivering, linguistic thinness, or, to use Massumi's words, a dynamic plane of 'tensions and trajectories' (67). Just as this plane has a particular position in space and time, it also gestures to multiple pasts and/or futures. It's this distinctive presence of immanence in the Hodgins poem that attracts us into that virtual region, that un-thought, open field:

The Map[2]

The map is just about as old as memory.
It has more options than a young man leaving home,
more lines and broken veins than an old man's face.

Exactly in the centre are the clustered names
that vowels and consonants were first tried out on
before the dumb cartographies could be defined.

And though the map seems two-dimensional
that centre is depressed enough for simple things
to keep slipping back into its lowest common point.

> Spread out amongst the late-afternoon shadows
> the map is covering everything that matters.
> The way things are it can't be folded up again.
> (Hodgins 115)

In 'The Map,' the hints of the poem's virtual trajectories are so intense that we can almost see them. Indeed, the spatio-semantic projection verges on the graphic. What we know of the tensions of settler history alerts us to the variety of possibilities for 'the clustered names' of settlement, and the two dimensionality of the page trembles on the cusp of a third and even a fourth dimension because of the way the eye keeps 'slipping back' into the map's depressed centre. But what positions us on the *verge* of these things—as opposed to the dramatic propulsion into the multi-dimensional, complex system that Ella O'Keefe identifies in Anderson's work—is Hodgins's simple, conversational diction: it's practical and affable enough to keep us in a familiar space: 'an old man's face,' 'the late-afternoon shadows,' etc. We read such phrases quickly, comfortably. But that comfortable sensation, that we have perceived and understood something readily *knowable*, leaves us before the end of the poem. It is as if those afternoon shadows, along with the other spaces of which the map says nothing, must be discarded without further comment. Returning to Massumi's definition of the virtual, we will recall that just as it constitutes 'the future-past of actuality,' it also acts as 'the pool of potential' in which history discards 'the states it renounces.' The map, as a veritable crystallisation of settler epistemology, attempts to preserve, in the same way that Hodgins's conversational language attempts to preserve, a fixed image of what is otherwise that aforementioned virtual plane of 'tensions and trajectories.' 'The way things are'—the extent to which the map insists on its own image—'it can't be folded up again.'

The steady insistence on an actual state of affairs, even as we can feel this state beginning to dissolve back into a virtual potentiality, grants much of Hodgins's poetry a multi-directionality, or a feeling that the poem is tending towards different directions simultaneously. Invariably, the experience of reading a Hodgins poem is that, as our eyes track down the page ('vertically'), our vision is also drifting outwards (to the right of the text, or 'horizontally'). This is part of what Ivor Indyk might call the 'expansive tendency' of a certain kind of 'provincial stance' in some Australian poetry—most noticeable, for Indyk, in the work of Les Murray. Despite its provinciality, such poetry 'is used to looking within its world and beyond it at the same time.' However crystalline the detail, 'precisely because it is finely observed, [it] is never simply a detail. The closer you look, the more you see' (81). Peter Larkin finds a similar notion of the provincial in two North American scholars, Robert Pogue Harrison and Edward S. Casey (who, like Murray, were contemporaneous with Hodgins). Of Harrison's *Forests* (1992), Larkin writes that the provincial provides not so much a periphery for nostalgia as an anchor for abstract thought: the provinces, therefore, 'are not so much dense fringes as primordial fragments at once opaque to our gaze, but persistently attached to what we take for the demarcations of our world.' In turn, Larkin refers to Casey's phenomenology of place, where it is the very horizon of a place that grants it depth, or the 'givenness' that provides a 'situatedness' with relation to regions *beyond* that place (56). While a poet like Larkin (and, we could argue, poets like Anderson and Rankin) is interested in how this horizon requires 'a poetics of offering, of dedication' (57), Hodgins is generally concerned too much with the demands of the place at hand to engage primarily in such an explicit, extra-provincial imagination.

Nevertheless, it is the multi-directional potential of their provincial locations that grants poems like 'The Map' the quality of a visual sketch. In their informal structures the lines are

almost porous, but they are invariably part of a discourse of care and consideration for both the surrounding country and, in a suggestion of the horizon, for an imagined, attentive audience. The way you might make some observations about the state of a paddock or a stand of trees, Hodgins's phrases are as much about a communicative journey from one person towards another as they are about the space, the region, the environs around us or around it. Additionally, as in any sketch, inherent in a conversation are traces of movement: encounters and departures, pauses, interruptions, corrections, stutters etc. In Hodgins's semantic patterning, there's invariably a rhythmic alternation between the crystallising image—e.g. 'the map is covering everything that matters'—and its potential for movement—whether through the use of the gerund in this case or, in others, by emphasising the smallness and precariousness of the image in the face of surrounding space ('Exactly in the centre are the clustered names'). Then, around such sedimentation of detail there are always the smoother flows of speech rhythms, which dissolve things and carry us onwards once more. The dissolution of sediment—the departure from the particular into an extended process—is a rhythmic substantiation of Indyk's 'provincial stance.'

In imbuing the map with a quality of movement, Hodgins is recovering something of what Paul Carter would call 'the movement history that underwrites geography' (22). For Carter, this is a fundamentally creative process that involves restoring poetic content to the map in order to communicate something of the *spatiality* of the journey that leads to cartographic production. 'To identify the poetic substrate of geography's discourse,' he writes, 'a way of reading is needed that can resist science's flattening out of language, its rejection of the figurative way in which concepts are framed.' The space of the map is a 'mythical' one, 'not the temporally and spatially grooved manifold of human and non-human topographies that constitute the operational space of encounter, the space where things happen' (22). Carter's use of the word 'mythical' here is also significant because of Taylor's comment at the start of this essay, that Hodgins's poems favour the typical over the mythical. However, we have *also* seen how his poetry occupies the typical always with an eye on the very precariousness of 'the typical' as an ontological category. Perhaps the myth is a perfect analogue for the Hodgins poem: like both cartographic and mythic discourses, Hodgins' line so powerfully occupies the region of the typical because of its ability to suggest the potential for movement into other, 'unlined' spaces.

This leads us to something akin to the 'sense of mobile space' that O'Keefe finds in Anderson's work (3). Similarly, in *Who Wants to Create Australia?* Harrison writes:

> Hodgins has this filmic ability of describing locale and human figures as they move around 'in process' and transect real atmospheres. Against the tendency to make Australian country fit within the picture frame or the long-shot, Hodgins's work makes it manifest that there is no such thing as a purely abstract faculty of seeing; there is only a way of seeing which is part and parcel of moving and doing. (*Australia* 63–64)

Harrison takes us towards something of an ecological notion of bodily movement here, which, because the body is drawn into webs of complex interactions, draws forth language as a kind of neural response to form and to region. In Hodgins, the landscape's the strange attractor in a complex, non-linear system: immanent to the poem but never fully actualised within it, paddocks and slopes and horizons attract the speaker's gaze, and in doing so they draw forth language. Landscape, in other words, attracts language; language, in turn, becomes an ecological rather than an ego-driven response. 'If the ego remains imperialistically at the

centre of utterance,' writes Harrison, 'then the consequences are rational control, a self-defeating sense of irony, an inability to deal with non-human meaning' ('Degradation' 135). Certainly, rationalisation, self-deprecation and a resistance to less-than-obvious meanings are all abundant in Hodgins's work. He was 'laconic, pragmatic and sceptical,' according to Robert Gray in his elegy, 'Philip Hodgins' (in Hodgins 247). However, as we have seen already, it is also the case that his poetry tends towards the *suggestion*—if not the actualisation—of what Harrison calls 'an ecological language,' which 'lets the poem become a place to work out a relationship with meaning' ('Degradation' 135). Poems like 'The Map' and 'A Note from Mindi Station' might seem to want to silence pathos, or even to silence language (paraphrasing Harrison in 'Degradation' 134), but there is also the very strong possibility that they are entirely incapable of doing such things, that their greatest riches are to be found hovering around their edges.

If the Hodgins poem describes a kind of line—on the one side of which is actualised experience, and on the other the vast spaces of the unseen—then it conforms to what Martin Leer identifies as a 'geopoetic trope' in Australian literature, 'the poetic verse-line as a boundary fence.' For Leer, the verse-line is how Australian poetry 'spatially imprints the temporal order of a culture on a perceived world' (73). Australian space enters history by preventing *motion*; it attempts to prevent motion precisely with the implementation of *lines*:

> Nowhere is the question of lines in the landscape more apparent than in Australia with its alternative systems of lines inscribed on and embodied in the landscape: the endlessly complex system of Aboriginal song-lines and dreaming-tracks overlaid with the European settlers' absurdly ineffectual, barbed-wire rabbit-proof and dingo-proof fences. (77)

Leer argues that in European-Australian landscape poetry, the poetic line represents and embodies the boundary fence (which he compares to Seamus Heaney's equivalence of verse-line and plough-furrow in European poetry). But there is a difference between the boundary fence verse-line and the European plough-furrow line which is not just to do with geographic location, but also to do with a relationship to speech, and to sound:

> A boundary-fence verse-line marks a different border between the speakable and the beyond-speech from the plough-furrow verse line, which is ineradicable and periodically renewed. The boundary fence is more reminiscent of Ferdinand de Saussure's famous diagram of language as the interface between a plane of thought and a plane of sound imagery, echoing—and *tidalectic* rather than dialectic—sets of lines which never meet. (78)

It is in the last phrase of the above quote, in the 'sets of lines which never meet,' that we come towards something of the 'looseness' of the organisational principles at play in Hodgins's poetry. We have already seen how the Hodgins line restricts motion in poems like 'Mindi Station,' where 'the singular direction of meaning and intention' runs, like a long, wire fence, 'immaculately . . . back into thought-structure' (Harrison, 'Degradation' 128–29). At the same time, it is the very thinness of the fence's structure, the looseness of the relationship between language and the space that it purports to demarcate, which provides myriad opportunities for ambiguities to pass through its holes.

Invariably, the Hodgins poem begins with a short, pithy phrase ('The isolation seemed so reasonable,' 'My father has always been reasonable,' 'The soil looks almost good enough to

eat,' 'The smell of fox is as strong as burnt hair' etc.). Such phrases act as the central lines or marks of a sketch—they are the points to which our eyes go first. The second, but equally important, function of these phrases is to initiate the itemisation of things in a field of perception. In a way, this yields what Angus Fletcher identifies in Walt Whitman's poetry as 'an impressionist effect' because, as does Whitman, Hodgins delights in joining 'unconnected ingredients [and] touches of colour' (106). But one of the many features that distinguishes Hodgins from a poet like Whitman is that Hodgins's itemisations seek to develop coherent, carefully-measured narratives. In Whitman, however, his great series of impressionistic phrases 'are allowed to verge on chaos' (Fletcher 107). The idea, writes Fletcher, is that the Whitman phrase resists subordination: '[n]o phrase is ever *grammatically* superordinate, superior to, any other phrase' (110). The result is a kind of 'vertiginous flux . . . with a suspended grammatical order that allows restless images to flow into one another' (Cooke 76–77). Elsewhere, I have shown how Pablo Neruda, whose earlier poetry consisted very much of wave upon wave of Whitmanian 'parallel quasi-biblical rhythms' (Fletcher 107), would in later work constrain the chaotic potential of such rhythms in order to prescribe a particular trajectory for Latin America (Cooke 73–114). Where Neruda wanted to create a story of a trans-national community in *Canto General*, Hodgins also delimits the rhythmic potential of his phrases by ordering them within narrative hierarchies. Hodgins, of course, is far more provincial than much of Neruda; rather than any kind of ambition to speak to a *polis* as large as a nation, Hodgins is interested in a regional *polis* of *neighbours*. His narrative structures are conversational, in other words, designed according to the customs of a rural Australian discourse. As those first lines of poems above suggest, what's itemised is what is deemed *reasonable*: there is only so much that is acceptable material for everyday conversation between men in the bush, after all.

The underlying objective of the Whitman phrase is to seek unity in infinite disparity by way of proposing an ever-expanding present moment, into which everything can, for the purposes of a national beginning, *be*. Listing stark images in order to propose their unity is important in Hodgins, too but, in near-opposite fashion, where Whitman's disparity is to end in the unification of a nation, Hodgins's narrative order is a fence from a process in which everything becomes *unresolved*. Again, we might think of the multi-directionality of the poetry. Almost at random, one can turn to poems like 'The New Floor' or 'Those Yabbies': certainly, the vivid domesticity of building floors and catching yabbies is arresting, but what is perhaps more conspicuous is that such poems begin almost from nowhere—there is almost no impression of the wider, complex geographic structures on which they rest, and from which they draw their distinguishing speech and action. The poems are tightly-bound points, therefore, which can only be unravelled. In other words, the Hodgins poem tends towards entropy: it grows hazy, it trembles, it avoids that vitalistic affirmation of an abstracted body or *polis*—which is what Whitman needs to make any kind of poetry in the first place. This is another link between Hodgins and John Anderson. O'Keefe has noted that Anderson doesn't have a nationalist agenda, he's 'not staking a claim of ownership on the territory.' Instead, for her the work is 'a question left open, the beginning of "something different"' (7). Whether the poet's conscious of it or not, it's this *beginning* that's important: a question of the possible, rather than of what has already been.

Importantly for our purposes here, Leer's boundary-fence line is charged with what he calls 'the other side.' It becomes, of course, the periphery of the provincial attitude: 'it is almost more an evocation *of what is beyond* than what is known' (77–78; my emphasis). The line proposes a border, too, against which Settler Australian culture defines itself (78). A prime example of this geopoetic trope for Leer is Hodgins's 'Midday Horizon':

Midday Horizon[3]

> The summer's worn out paddocks
> aligned as neatly as quatrains on a page,
> one of those highly buffed duco skies,
> and in between, a fine graph line
> as nervy as a lot of black snakes in the heat . . .

This poem is of such value to us here because simultaneously it enacts that flowing, conversational cascade of impressionistic phrasing from no place in particular, all contained in the polished geometry of neat 'quatrains,' 'highly buffed duco skies' and 'a fine graph line.' Furthermore, 'Midday Horizon' enacts the conflation of 'vertical' and 'horizontal' movements—most strikingly, in the final line of the quote above, the vertical and horizontal axes converge to form a 'nervy' wave in the line of the graph, resonating deeply with the wavering, uncertain 'blur' in the other poems I've discussed (and pregnant with the allusion to an indigenous custodianship of country that lots of black snakes in the heat might suggest). We can keep going to a later section of the poem, too, where a man is seen walking slowly behind a big mob of sheep:

> From where you are
> his shape is continually being modified
> as if he were walking through different dimensions.
> Sometimes he seems to slip into separate pieces,
> then pull back together, temporarily.
> The same thing is happening to the tree.
> The man stops
> and a low piece of him draws right away this time.
> It must be a dog.
> You notice the silence, how near it is.
> There's no threat that you can see
> and yet the thin exposed horizon trembles.
> (196)

So there we have it: man, tree and dog changing shape and entering different dimensions and then, as if at the very edge of what is now possible, the horizon—'exposed'—trembles. It's the possibility of what might lie beyond the boundary fence that incites fear in the colonist, but it's also the imagination of what lies beyond that is the crucial first step for decolonisation. As both Deborah Bird Rose (52) and Paul Carter (101) have written in different contexts, such a line would denote not only a demarcation but also a *connection* between two things: '[i]t is the precondition of discovering likeness,' writes Carter, 'it is the gap necessary if meeting is to occur.'

But this possibility is never taken much further in any consciously sustained way by Hodgins: formally his work remains enclosed by the descriptive mode of a European pastoral tradition, and by that particular, localised epistemology that eschews pretension out of a greater concern for 'common sense' forms of understanding. This is the gritty, unresolvable kernel that he has left us with. Of Hodgins's *Up On All Fours*, Martin Langford writes, 'there is a conservatism in the country which has a crippling effect on the imagination: an incuriosity about human society—as if all the answers were known by practical men.' Langford also suggests that the laconic note that Hodgins mostly employs 'can make many areas off-limits to the

imagination' unless that imagination is 'liberated by the one allowable Aussie emotion, grief' (in Ryan 28). Brendan Ryan argues, however, that Hodgins simply cannot *avoid* the laconic note because it's a way of accepting, like Martin Johnston, that 'the dying time is now' (Hodgins was diagnosed with leukaemia in 1983, but finally died from the illness in 1995). 'Being told that he was about to die forced Hodgins to write about what many of his readers deny,' writes Ryan. 'It would have been a greater conservatism on Hodgins' behalf if he had shared in that denial' (28). So, having outlined the boundaries surrounding the Hodgins poem, I'd like to conclude by suggesting something of a counter-argument to the one I've just outlined: openly affirming the reality of disease and biological decay—the acknowledgement that, despite one's best efforts, things cannot be conserved as they have been until now—could be the ultimate gesture towards a radical—indeed, even an anarchic—poetics. It's a willing donation of a humanistic gaze to the unpredictability of the virtual. In this regard I am forever shocked by Hodgins. I battled with cancer for a couple of years, and for most of that time I could think of little more than of how I wanted to return to a mode of existence in which I was once again in control of my own body. But Hodgins stared from the boundary fence, 'squint[ing] into the glare,' until his eyes were 'nothing more than two short twitching lines.'

NOTES

[1] Originally published in *Up On All Fours* (1993).
[2] Originally published in *Animal Warmth* (1990).
[3] Originally published in *Things Happen* (1995).

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