

Voices in a Landscape-the fiction of Peter Cowan

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Peter Cowan's prose is as stark as the countryside through which it moves. In his earliest stories, collected in Drift, (1944) almost anonymous characters eke out in a barren landscape an existence of peremptory actions and words. By Voices (1988), the actions have dwindled, so that we glimpse them only in retrospect through the words people weave around the objects--trees, stamps, toy soldiers, orchids--^{that} they cling to to give substance to their lives. Even these objects exist only as they are spoken: "it's the words that remain. They stay. The things we have said." But they offer no reassurance, no guarantee of our existence. "They terrify me." (p.111). In his latest novel, The Hills of Apollo Bay, Cowan allows the voices to give us more details, to construct a whole history rather than merely hint at a number of disconnected histories. Yet the historical verisimilitude adds no density to the lives it holds. If anything, the voices seem ever less embodied as they weave from character to character through time and place, recalling Dr Johnson's celebrated definition of a network: "Any thing reticulated and decussated . . . with interstices between the intersections". The characters give their lives density only as they capture the external through art or through words. As their voices intersect, they capture meaning in the interstices, in what remains unsaid, the gap between the mind and its object.

This is paradoxical in a novel that takes its name from a particular time and place. But although this place is mentioned on the first page of the book, it is only in the last chapter that the narrative shifts to this place and explains its significance. The novel begins with a conversation in a hospital in Perth, in the present. The first sentence, "It was very beautiful", refers to "The hills. At Apollo Bay," but the reference remains disconnected from anything else. The narrative shifts instead to prewar Perth and its hinterland and then to wartime Melbourne. Only in the last chapter does it finally reach Apollo Bay, its hills, and their cryptic significance.] The elusiveness of the hills is matched by the elusiveness of character. The opening conversation contains no referents for its speakers, whose identity we have to construct from clues scattered through the subsequent chapters. The story itself is not a record of unfolding action so much as one man's meditation on the meaning given to his life by the three women he has relationships with in the years before and during the second world war. His consciousness is the filter through which we see most of the places and events of the narrative. Yet he remains unnamed, and does not appear in the present time of the novel.

This time is the occasion of the illness, probably terminal, of Jessica, the woman he took to Apollo Bay. Yet it is not her story either, for although he may have been central to her life she is only peripheral to his, and is not party to his most important reflections. Her illness provokes her own and her daughter's reflections on their separate pasts, and these in turn evoke his meditations on his past. Jessica's importance, to him

on to the novel, is defined only by the hills of Apollo Bay. Yet they too, are peripheral, framing the narrative but remote from everything that happens between. Their function is to provide the man, and perhaps the woman, with an image that places his life in its time. By a further paradox, however, although the novel is concerned with the unravelling of this life, with the way the external world of people and objects enters the inner consciousness, the voices that name his world leave him anonymous. Even his paternity of Kathy, his child by Jessica, remains a matter of inference by the reader, and outside Kathy's own knowledge. The man she knows as her father, and whom the novel at first encourages the reader to accept as such, turns out to be another figure on the periphery of her true father's life. This father, the centre of the novel, is constituted only by the images he makes and the voices he hears.

This character, neither the narrator nor the object of the narration, is the book's grammatical subject. He may not speak all the action, but he is its begetter, either literally as Kathy's father or figuratively as the man who shapes Jessica's consciousness, teaches her to see and so to live. In the same way his consciousness is first shaped by the artist who is his first love and who teaches him to see.

Chronologically, the story begins with its subject a philosophy student aspiring to be a writer. Like Barbara, the artist, he feels trapped in Perth. The radical politics of Joe Measer and the abstractions of Kant help him to see his position, but neither offers him a way out. Barbara, by teaching him to see, shows him the way of escape into himself through acceptance

of what and where he is. She herself has to escape to Europe, leaving him caught in the war machine and snatched off to Melbourne. Here his ability to live and write expands as he learns to extricate himself from the entanglements of society, the inhuman machine that is the direct counterpart to Kant's vast abstractions.

This acceptance of the material world is conveyed in two conversations, the one with Barbara and the other with Jessica. The first, at the start of the second chapter, or section, of the novel, takes place in gardens near the centre of Perth.

The carp were still in the brown water, held by the clear light, and heat, they feel the warmth, she said, of course they do. And they are not gold. Red. A very fine red. The leaves of the waterlillies shadowing the water by the banks. Beyond the pond trees screened the red brick buildings of the law courts. The lawns thinned about the exposed roots and patches of deep shade. He could no longer hear the city. Trams passing down Barrack ~~St~~ Street to the ferry almost silent. The neatly wrapped lunch packet, the stiff white paper, opened easily. The carp barely moving.

She came towards him, along the path clear of shadow, towards the top of the steps above the ponds. She said: I thought you were asleep.

Barbara, he said.

You were expecting someone else?

Watching the carp, he said. But it was Kant's fault.

Kant.

His blue spectacles. And that pond.

You should give up that class. I don't see you as a philosopher.

Too late now.

She opened the paper bag she carried. Actually I don't see the problem. I accept if you're born with blue spectacles the world looks blue.

Is blue.

Looks. And I have to accept you have to learn that it isn't. Word games. (p.26)

The scene, so rich in detail, so carefully placed, is not in fact at all descriptive. The details relate to the characters' preoccupations with seeing and with meaning. Yet these preoccupations come only from the details, from the mundanity of the paper wrappings as much as from the red beauty of the carp. These details are not[†] setting but substance. The characters create themselves by relating to these details and then to each other. Each comes to know the other physically both as lover and as landscape, and through the other comes more intimately to know ^{wider} the landscape. Yet the landscape, whether the market gardens [^] seen as the fields of Arles, or the salt spreading on flats cleared of their timber, or the sun on the twisted wooden boards of the veranda, is always a landscape of the mind. The characters take their being from the details they choose to notice.

This conversation marks the beginning of the man's education. Under Barbara's guidance he learns to move beyond Kant's abstractions, to see Perth and its hinterland both in their material solidity and through the tradition of western art,

a tradition of making for human use. This enables him to come to terms with his parents, their puzzled failure to understand the drives that take him from them, and their acceptance of a landscape that for him remains sterile or destructive. Barbara teaches him to see ^{his home country} ~~it~~ as a place of human endeavour, even as a place where for a time he can work, but it remains hostile to his ambitions. Perth even more seems to both of them too small, constricting, remote from everything that matters. But whereas she escapes to Europe, he feels that he must discover himself in Australia, and is content to wait until external events give him his direction.

This direction is first towards Melbourne, where for a time he finds "everything our poor little hairshirt community on the other side of the desert has deprived itself of so sanctimoniously". He meets artists who give him not only the understanding of the spirit of the country that he has been searching for, but also the idea that art is important for itself, a source of life, not an embellishment. He works these ideas out in letters to Barbara that are at once an explanation of his feelings and a part of his apprenticeship to the craft of words. But he also meets the waitress and occasional prostitute, Leslie, and continues his association with Harry, the Perth anarchist who has dropped out of society into the wartime racketeering that eventually costs him his life. In contrast to this world of seedy criminality and art, of individuals living on their wits and talents, he meets Jessica, assured daughter of Toorak privilege. While Leslie comforts him, Jessica challenges him and eventually rescues him from despair. It is then, at the

close of the novel, that he takes her to Apollo Bay and teaches her to see the country as Barbara had first taught him.

It's a strange place, she said. Could you write about it?

It's an odd question. But no. I don't think so. I should think some painters might get something out of the bones and skeletons of those hills.

No one could live here. It frightens me.

They have tried, he said. It may have frightened them.

But it has a kind of beauty. I think I'd never really seen these hills.

As they came back onto the road by the bay, the hills behind them, the rain came sharply, running out of their clothes, out of their hair, and she turned to him laughing. Who needs clothes, she said. It's the wild dog, he said. You disturbed him. . . She stared at the glow of the burning wood, still, as though she had forgotten the cold, though her skin held a faint roughness. He held the towel about her shoulders, moved it slowly down her back. Those strange hills, she said. They were so beautiful. (p.236)

These are the last words of the novel, yet they appear to resolve nothing, or indeed to relate to any of the action. The past tense of the last sentence appears to close them off from present and future, shutting them in the isolation left by futile human efforts to cultivate them. Yet they take us back in the text, and forward in time, to the opening sentence: "It was very beautiful." This sentence, spoken by Jessica to Kathy but never explained to her, seems to sum up the mother's experience of

life, the message she wishes to leave behind her. The rest of the novel can be read as a narrative bring us, the readers, to this same point.

We can also see this point as the end to which Cowan has been moving throughout his work, or perhaps better as the single point around which all his work circles. The man who is the subject of The Hills of Apollo Bay could also be the boy preparing to leave the farm in 'Drift'. The difference is that in the novel we listen to the son as he tries to explain himself, to understand his parents and have them understand him, as he frees himself by sharing his country with his lover. In the early story we see the characters from the outside, watching them as their inevitable destiny sweeps them apart. The 'drift' is not towards anything, but merely away. The title embodies the national mood of its time, when politicians and publicists were concerned to stem 'the drift from the land' which was seen as depopulating the country and destroying our national character. Cowan, however, sees it rather as a drift from sterility to ~~even~~ the destructive form of life symbolized by war and the armoured carrier its sends as its harbinger. The later novel concentrates rather on the ^{disintegrating} ~~destructive~~ qualities of the war, and reveals the beauty that the land still yields to those who are prepared to learn it through work or art. Nevertheless, the closing image of the hills emphasizes their hostility to human settlement. They are beautiful only as they are left alone.

Both city and country in The Hills of Apollo Bay are feminine, places where the man can find himself and his work. Before he finds this work, however, he needs a woman to guide him to an

understanding of the place. In Perth, on the farm where he grew up, and in his first years in Melbourne he is the adolescent simultaneously learning the body of his lover and of the land. He learns to recognize the countryside of his upbringing, which he has rejected, as capable of sustaining love and art. This represents what Marilyn French has called the inlaw aspect of femininity, its nurturing capacity. Melbourne, ~~however~~, despite the freedom it offers him to realize himself, represents outlaw femininity. It is essentially disabling, robbing him of self-control and leading him to collapse. Jessica rescues him from this collapse, and in return he brings her to a full awareness of her own femininity. Now he is the teacher, awakening her to the land and to her own body. Her full awakening comes only when they escape the city to the inlaw femininity of the hills of Apollo Bay. These hills constitute the image of breasts impending over the navel of the bay. The land itself, which has failed to nurture human settlement, fulfils its inlaw femininity by nurturing their love and their child. This love in turn brings masculinity and femininity together in full unity, embodying neither masculine power through the threat of rape nor feminine power through male fears of castration and collapse.

swan more ~~yet more~~ characteristically, ^{describes} ~~Cowan's~~ ^{that} landscapes are neither ^{as} ~~like~~ ^{such} masculine nor feminine. Unlike writers ^{as} ~~like~~ Clarke, Baynton or Richardson, whose bush exudes an outlaw femininity that equally threatens masculine exploitation and feminine nurture, the landscapes of Cowan's fictions are generally neutral and passive. They themselves are threatened by those they isolate, and they ~~they~~ conceal an unstated menace from those who have not been able

to come to terms with their own sexuality or sociability. Because it exposes their inadequacy, ^{the land} ~~it~~ is seen as a threat by those who are too weak to accept its beauty, and they in turn threaten its fragility. In 'Drift', the menace is merely suggested by the soldiers in their armoured carrier, symbol of a war which will destroy the family by taking the boy away. In later stories, it is more precisely located. In 'Red-backed Spiders' (1958) the land provides the instrument of destruction. The father turns his own frustrations against the boy who constructs a world of his imagination from the discarded rubbish in the tip. Driven to breaking point, the boy uses the spiders the land supplies to destroy the father who torments him. In 'The Tractor' (1965), the land is the object of the destruction. The tractor, symbol of male power, is both the direct agency of the destruction and the object which focusses the men's hatred of the one who is different, the man who is able to live with what the bush offers instead of joining them to subject it to their will.

In 'Mobiles' and 'The Collector' (1979), the barren land becomes the accomplice of those who are alien, isolating and, at least potentially, destroying men who seem at home in it until they allow themselves to be diverted by outsiders. A similar pattern underlies 'The House' (1965), 'Forms in Wood' (1976) and 'The Brown Glass' (1979). In each of these stories a man ^{jeopardizes} ~~threatens~~ ^{his easy solitude} ~~the solitude he is at ease in~~ by allowing an outsider to share his home. In the first of these stories, the man's ability to continue enjoying his solitude comes to depend on maintaining the distant yet recurrent relationship he has built

with the woman. In the other two, the woman departs, but her brief presence seems to linger as a threat over the harmony into which she has intruded, a question over its apparent completeness. For, while the man may learn to live alone in the bush, he ^{do so only by refraining from any assertion of masculinity. Once he attempts to} can ^{awaken} its barrenness ^{only} by ^{he} destroying ^s it. In 'The Tractor', the woman, while accepting her status as outsider, elects to stay, siding with the farmer to clear the scrub and raise another generation. In The Hills of Apollo Bay, the man leaves the mother and avoids any acknowledgement of his child. His completion comes only through art, and by allowing the hills to remain as a memory, freed from the brief settlement that had attempted to tame them.

The menace hidden in the landscape comes not only from those who would destroy it, like the farmers in 'The Tractor', but also from what it may do to those who understand it but cannot find a way to live with it. This forms the theme of Cowan's novel Summer (1964). Compared with later work, both plot and description in this novel are relatively elaborate, but the effect is still to isolate the man and woman at its centre against the empty landscape that surrounds them. Yet the novel also shows how the landscape can change from outlaw feminine, ^h challenging the masculinity of brutish males like the storekeeper, ^r to inlaw feminine for those who choose to understand it. This change is reflected in the structure of the novel, which begins with a portrayal of the man as victim of his sterile exclusion by his wife and the cityscape, and changes, as he finds himself in the country, to a portrayal as the rescue by the man of the feminine potential of the storekeeper's wife. He is able to

achieve this rescue only because she first recognizes the feminine potential he is discovering in himself as he escapes the sterility of his work to his true vocation ^{by} ~~of~~ [^] ~~of~~ photographing the parrots.

The landscape that provides the man with an escape holds the woman's husband like a prison. It is a scanty patch of scrub that gives a home to the parrots that provide an object for the man's photography. To the storekeeper's companions, Stan Riley and his family, it is merely waste land to be destroyed. The tenuous romance between the man and woman--their names, Henry and Jill, seem arbitrary and add nothing to their personalities--develops precariously under the threat of the violence of the Rileys to the land and of ~~her husband~~ ^{the storekeeper} to Henry and his parrots. The storekeeper's impulse, on sensing the significance the birds hold for Henry, is immediately to threaten them:

"Might go after them with a gun . . . Bloody pests." He slammed the door of the car.

Eventually, however, he attacks not the parrots but the man, and is killed in the ~~process~~ ^{resulting fight}. Paradoxically, the Rileys then save the lovers. In accomplishing the final destruction of the scrub and its birds, the bulldozer they employ destroys the evidence of the homicide, and so grants the man and the woman the freedom they seek. They can find this freedom, however, only by fleeing from the bush siding, whose people they threaten by being different, by demanding more from life than booze, sex and money.

In these fictions, the perceived menace of the bush grows in the lives of those who, in their desire to dominate, remain alien from the environment that sustains them. In other stories, Cowan

of the bush

shows how the scrubby anonymity [^] offers brief refuge to those who find themselves at home nowhere. For these people, the real menace lies in the cities and towns, even at the wayside stops, where the brutality of society threatens them from cars become weapons and homes become prisons. [↑] At the beginning of Summer (Henry flees this suburban environment), only to find the same forces incarnate in the aggressive mateship of his new neighbours. In the novella The Empty Street (1965), ~~these~~ ^{same} forces work themselves out entirely within the suburban environment suggested by the title, and only at the end does the man who walks the street find brief escape twenty-five years too late.

In Summer, Cowan allows the plot surrounding the husband's death to distract the reader's attention from the bid by man and woman to escape from the meanings imposed by others and find a meaning for themselves. The Empty Street tells a similar story, but the details of the plot, even the actual killing, remain implicit. The man at its centre has found in his orchid-house an escape from the futilities of work and domesticity. This escape is however threatened literally by the stones of the urchins in the lane behind--one of the empty streets of the title--and by his neighbour's boorish interference, his children's indifference and his wife's contempt. These factors are symbolized in the empty street of his dreams, down which he flees from unknown pursuers to an impossible escape. Almost in this dream, he strangles a casual acquaintance, and the pursuers become actual policemen. He escapes to a plant nursery where his work with the woman who owns it (for a day) ^{creates} the harmony of natural and

human to which he has aspired, but this discovery comes too late. Inevitably, his pursuers overtake and capture him. The street of his life remains empty.

This empty street of the title symbolizes both sexual and social sterility, but the novella, through the images of the orchid-house and the nursery, places where natural beauty is brought to perfection by human work, provides an alternative to this bleak vision. Both the man and the woman ^{briefly} escape ~~if only~~ for a day, from their socially determined roles to produce a harmony that embraces cultural and natural as well as masculine and feminine, and thus transcends the opposition between the individual and landscape. More characteristically in Cowan's fictions, however, men and women are bound by their culture into ways of life that deny the possibility of harmony. Women retreat into a sterile domesticity that denies the feminine principle of nurture. Men are driven to dominate the landscape and their women, and so destroy both. Even in The Hills of Apollo Bay, Cowan's most complex work, while the man draws nurture from women, he expresses his own creativity only through words, and so finds harmony only by withdrawing from the land and from other people. The land itself remains neutral, awaiting a harmony of masculine and feminine that will generate in it a culture that will enable people to live at home with its uncompromising beauty, a destination at the end of the empty streets built by European settlers to keep it at bay.

The failure of Europeans to make a home for themselves in the landscape is expressed in the stark prose to which Cowan's work has steadily moved. The bare sentences enable the speakers

to glide over the abyss they feel opening beneath them, hold them to the external guarantees offered to their reality by the objects of their obsessions. The orchids of The Empty Street become glass orchids in the story of that name in Voices (1988). The houses become even more precarious refuges. The murder in the house is multiplied, its cause not so much human frustration as the immensity of the sky, the emptiness that represents the ultimate in human alienation. So, as Cowan begins his work under the shadow of the second world war, of the violence that threatens to destroy the puny beginnings of European settlement in this country, he ends with the retreat of meaning from language that followed from this war as an urban society lost touch both with its sources and its present environment. Just as the attempts at settlement have left the hills virtually untouched, the words of the settlers fail to obtain a purchase on meaning. Yet the nature that we glimpse through these words still gives us reason to hope for a future where, if we abandon our illusions, we may understand its reality and so reach our destination.

Cowan's work starts with the contemporary loss of faith even in words, but he moves on to re-establish a connection between the words we use and the landscapes in which we wander. Recognizing ^{that} there are no signs, his characters make their own.